

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody, I'm joined today by Michael Wu. Michael is a freshman at UW-Madison studying music. And he speaks Chinese as well as a little bit of French. Thank you so much for joining me today, Michael.

Michael Wu

Thank you for having me.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, so I know you pretty well, but I don't really know anything about your language background. Could you just give us a brief overview of how you have studied languages in the past and what opportunities you had to use your language skills?

Michael Wu

Yeah, for sure. So I grew up speaking Chinese, it was the language my parents spoke. And oftentimes, I would go back to China just to visit relatives. And in order for me to do that, I would have to obviously be familiar with speaking Chinese. I will say I'm not -- I can't write Chinese, I can't write Chinese characters. I tried learning a little bit when I was younger, like in elementary school. But I just found it awfully difficult. Just the fact that you have to memorize so many characters in Chinese. So I can speak Chinese, but not really, write. I mean, I can recognize a couple basic characters. You know, if you were to compare it to English, you would be sort of like, basic words like the or, you know, just knowing the alphabet, like, it's probably around that level of proficiency, but nothing more. So yeah, I speak Chinese. And then besides that, I also studied French in high school for four years. I would consider myself an intermediate, I can't really hold like, a solid conversation. It's been a little while since I've reviewed French anyways. But yeah, that's kind of an overview. Yeah.

Claire Darmstadter

Great. Thank you. And if you're comfortable sharing, do you feel like your bilingualism has been overall seen as a good thing like additive bilingualism, as we call it? Or have there been instances perhaps of linguistic discrimination where either people would say things or not say things to kind of let you know that, you know, we don't appreciate your linguistic skills. And we don't think that these additional languages you speak are a positive part of who you are.

Michael Wu

I think for the most part, it's been positive. If anything, when people have approached me, you know, asking me about my background, my cultural background, my language background, they've always been interested, you know, they've always taken an interest in the Chinese culture. And oftentimes, it's a lot of fun, just, you know, teaching them a little bit, a little bit of Chinese, at least how to speak it. And, and so yeah, I would say it's mostly been positive. I haven't, in terms of just language, like the Chinese language, specifically, I don't think I've run into any sort of, you know, the negative bilingualism that you had mentioned. Mostly, it's been positive. Yeah. And I'm grateful for that.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, for sure. Because not everybody gets to experience that. So I'm really glad that you had that experience, although I'm a little bit surprised. You've also experienced, you know, that French education, kind of your run-of-the-mill, middle school, high school, French 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 kind of system. You know, we love our teachers, they're doing the best they can. But we also know most kids when they leave high school, kind of like you said, it's like, yeah, I can say a couple of things. I can maybe find the bathroom, but I don't feel very proficient in the language. And I know you said you visited China, obviously, you haven't lived there for an extensive period of your life, so you can't necessarily comment on their educational system. But just kind of thinking broadly about how other nations might teach languages or what you've heard of, you know, how different nations kind of view bilingualism, multilingualism? Can you kind of explain or can you kind of think about what the US does? Why we might do it? And does it even make sense that we're teaching languages in this way?

Michael Wu

Yeah, so I think there are multiple parts to that question that you're trying to get at. I'll start with trying to address sort of what I've noticed about the US, you know, language education system as compared to like the Chinese system. I think in China, there's a very heavy emphasis on learning English, actually. English being just such a lingua franca in today's modern world. There's a very, there's an increasingly high demand just in general for English language teachers in China. And people who can speak English and people who have a proficiency in English, people look up on, people look up to them in general, whereas in this country, I feel you know, the impression that I've always gotten is in high school, you know, language is sort of this, it's a requirement for college, but students go into it with the mindset of studying for it, just kind of, for fun. That's the impression I get. Whereas in China, you know, a lot of students are committed to, you know, studying abroad, you know, just studying in the United States. And in order to do that they need a proficiency in English. So in general, I think, you know, students studying English, in China, it's much more serious, oftentimes, because it's so much more serious. And because learning English has a stake on their future career outlook, and just on their future, in general, I think there's a lot more discipline, when it comes to not only teachers in the classroom, you know, creating this disciplinary culture, that sounds kind of weird, but just in general, like discipline in the classroom. There's also like, the students like sort of disciplining themselves, you know, taking full control of their own learning. And I'm not saying that doesn't happen here. I just say, it's a little bit more commonplace in China, where, you know, learning English is seen as important.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, yeah. And, you know, we talked about Chinese, we talked about French, one thing we didn't talk about yet is music. And, you know, most people would argue that music probably isn't like a formal language, but it definitely plays a huge role in your life. And it's definitely used as a form of communication. So can you talk a little bit about how you view music as kind of a means of expressing yourself, of expressing thoughts that you might not be able to describe in English, Chinese or French?

Michael Wu

Well, that's a great question. And actually one that I love talking about just sort of the role that music plays in my life, and I would argue in everybody's life. I think music. It's sort of cliché when I say this, but music is a universal language. It transcends human, political, socio-economic boundaries. It's a way for people from two seemingly disparate, you know, walks of life, to be able to, you know, to be able to develop a seemingly unexpected relationship with one another. I've always felt, for me, music has been therapeutic. It has allowed me to express myself. And it's also allowed me just by listening to music to discover more about other people's experiences. There's actually this really great memoir that I'm reading right now, it's by Joy Harjo. It's *Crazy Brave*, actually, I'm reading it for a class. And in it, I was actually just thinking about this. She says "*Music is a startling bridge between familiar and strange lands. In music, I hear stomp dance shells, singing, I see suits, Satan, fine hats. I hear workers singing in the field. It is a way to speak beyond the confines of ordinary language.*" And I don't know that little bit just for me, it summarizes it pretty well, in a world that's so polarized politically, socially. We need something that brings us all together in that shared human experience, and I think music plays a really, really important role in that.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. Wow, such well said, and can you give us one reason why being multilingual is a good thing, something that should be celebrated, something that, you know, we tell kids, it's a superpower, why is it a superpower?

Michael Wu

Yeah, I think, in general, just learning another language really is learning another culture. It's exposing yourself to the humanity, to humanity that might not be entirely similar to you know, the humanity that you grew up in. Because language is so culture. Every sound that you make in language, the etymology of words, idioms, you know, they're all they're all a reflection of culture. Oftentimes, I will say when I speak Chinese, I almost feel like a different person than when I speak English. It just feels different. It's hard. It's hard to describe. But I think a large part of this, it's such a deep reflection of the culture. So anyways, back to the original point, I think learning another language allows you to experience another culture. And I don't know about you, but that sounds pretty cool to me, just to get to know another culture. And yeah, to broaden your horizons to broaden your understanding of the world.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, yeah. And you know, here we like to celebrate multilingualism, we like to celebrate people who can speak more than one language. I don't want to put you on the spot, but is there anything you might want to say before we close out? Perhaps in Chinese or in French that is particularly meaningful, or a funny word, or just anything you might want to say that kind of celebrates that?

Michael Wu

Yeah. I'm trying to think there's a lot that I could choose from actually thinking in Chinese. For some reason, okay. And this will probably be funny, like, you would expect something pretty deep, like, for me, I don't know, like, something like that. In Chinese. There's a saying this, this,

I'm not exactly sure if this is the right place to say it, but there's a thing called *pai ma pi*, this is the only thing I could think of. And it just means to kiss a**. Again, maybe this isn't the best place to say that, but that's the only thing I could think of and just literally in Chinese it means to smack a horse's ass.

Claire Darmstadter

Thank you, Michael. I appreciate that. You know, we talk about with kids, sometimes the way to get them to learn language is you find those funny things to say, so that's definitely a valid candidate. I really appreciate you talking with me for a few minutes. You have such a way with words in English and I'm sure many other languages and so it's just great to hear your perspective. And I hope you have a great rest of your semester.

Michael Wu

Thank you, you as well.