

As the noises of rollercoasters and screams faded away, we walked back to our car, just us, three happy kids in matching sky blue shirts and jean shorts, none of us older than twelve, our two grandparents-holding hands laughing, our mom and dad making jokes for the whole family. We talked about the food we ate and the fun we just had. But we noticed you continued to look back and stare at my family, until finally you decided you had something to say.

You turned and then we heard it: “This is America, you need to speak English. Nobody else is speaking a different language. You could be talking about me for all I know.” I stared at you, in your green shirt and huge sun hat. I remember thinking if we had poured water on you, you would’ve melted just like the witch in the wizard of oz. We looked at your family in shock. “She’s an old lady, don’t mind her,” one of the men with you said with a wave of his hand. Your green hat lowered with your head and you puckered your lips when the man said that. “Yo soy un viejo también y yo no hablo de otros así” my abuelo said. Your lips got even smaller when my grandfather spoke, like mine do when I eat seven warheads in a row.

“Where would you get the idea we were talking about you from? Not that it’s any of your business but we were just saying that we need to come here more often as a family,” Mami said. But that didn’t stop you. You continued to flail your arms around and insist the way we were speaking wasn’t appropriate because we were around other people who didn’t understand us. I remember the spit flying from your mouth with every harsh syllable that you said.

I hung my head in shame and began to walk faster to the car, ignoring the calls of my family. The car ride was silent, all of us thinking about what we might have done wrong.

From that moment on, whenever I was spoken to in Spanish, I’d respond in English, even though I knew my grandparents didn’t understand as well. I stopped speaking Spanish altogether. I wanted to pull it out of my head and throw it in the garbage so that I could forget it. Spanish wasn’t the only thing I tried to get rid of. I started looking at ways that made me more “American.” So I started straightening my hair to get rid of the curls. I straightened my hair every single week for two and a half years.

“El español era tu primer idioma, antes que tu entendia ingles entendistes español,” my abuelo told me. But I didn’t care. Everytime I went out with my family and they spoke Spanish it felt like everyone was staring at us. I could feel the eyes piercing the back of my head. “Cuando llegue a ustedes unito yo no entendí ninguna palabra de inglés. Pero todavía soy Americano la idioma que yo hablo no determina quién soy,” my abuelo said shaking his head

Starting high school was a turning point for me. Having to choose a world language that wasn’t English meant that what that old lady in the green shirt and sun hat said wasn’t true. You don’t need to speak English in America. America isn’t just one language, look, and style. America is made up of many languages, many people who are unique in their own ways and many different styles and cultures.

How could I let one random lady influence me to the point where I was ashamed of the language my family speaks when thousands upon thousands of other people are learning how to speak Spanish in schools? Why is it different for me?

I'm seventeen years old now and I can barely speak my first language. All because you, a mean old lady in a green shirt and an oversized sun hat. Because you said I wasn't American because of the language I spoke. My life isn't influenced by you anymore. You were just a random bitter old lady. Speaking a different language doesn't make me less American than anyone else. In fact, it makes me more American -- it makes me the best version of America.