

“Why and When We Speak Spanish in Public” by Myriam Marquez:

When I’m shopping with my mother or standing in line with my step dad, or anywhere else we may be together, we’re going to speak to one another in Spanish. That may appear rude to those who don’t understand Spanish and overhear us in public places.

Those around us may get the impression that we’re talking about them. They may wonder why we would insist on speaking a foreign tongue, especially if they knew that my parents do understand and do speak English. Let me explain why we haven’t adopted English as our official family language. For me, and most of the bilingual people I know, it’s a matter of respect for our parents and comfort in our cultural roots.

It’s not meant to be rude to others. It’s certainly not meant to be un-American—what defines American’s as being English speakers from North America. Being an American has very little to do with what language we use during our free time in a free country. From the beginning, this country was careful not to promote a government-mandated official language.

We understand that English is the common language and the one most often heard in international-business circles. We know that, to get ahead here, one must learn English. But that should not mean that somehow we must stop speaking in our native tongue whenever we’re in a public arena, as if we’re ashamed of whom we are.

But you know what’s rude? When there are two or more people who are bilingual and another person who speaks only English and the bilingual folks all of a sudden start speaking Spanish, which leaves out the English-only speaker. I don’t tolerate that. If I’m ever in a public place with my mom and dad and I bump into a friend who doesn’t speak Spanish, I will switch to English and introduce that person to my parents. They will respond in English, and do so with respect.