

Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat and *Dora the Explorer* Teach the Value of Non-English Language

Aubrey Keller

ABSTRACT

Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat premiered in 2001, featuring both Mandarin Chinese and English. A year prior, *Dora the Explorer* introduced a group of linguistically diverse characters in a multilingual English-Spanish program. Over twenty years later, American children continue to develop relationships with non-English languages in multilingual communities. Since the languages besides English that many speak face the threats of attrition and stigma, children's television shows that highlight the value of non-English languages are timely and applicable.

I respond to this current need by engaging in rhetorical analysis of language use in the first episode of *Sagwa* and of *Dora* as well as promotional material for each series. This analysis focuses on two features of language use that I call *form* and *delivery*, with *form* referring to whether the language is written or spoken, and *delivery* referring to which characters are using which language. I find that while *Sagwa* highlights how those with written Mandarin proficiency can preserve cultural values and enact community impact, *Dora* frames spoken Spanish fluency and multilinguality as applicable assets to everyday social situations and problem-solving. Although pointing to different benefits, both cartoons express to their child audiences that non-English languages are valuable.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, two bilingual cartoon heroines made successful television debuts. Under the creative direction of Amy Tan and based on a picture book she authored, *Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat (Sagwa)* first aired on PBS in September of 2001. Set in the late Qing dynasty, the show follows a family of cats who are scribes to a human magistrate and incorporates Mandarin Chinese.¹ In the first episode, audiences learn that several of Sagwa's family members value calligraphic writing in Mandarin and use their writing to make a difference in their community (Tan). One year prior, *Dora the Explorer (Dora)* featured its first adventure in which Dora uses her combined fluency in English and Spanish to overcome obstacles and meet a new friend (Wiener). Both shows received Daytime Emmys, were broadcast in both America and abroad, and, in their English versions, include phrases in a second language.² Each show's first episode incorporates language differently in terms of two features that I call *form* and *delivery*. By *form*, I mean the choice to present language in writing or speech, while *delivery* refers to which characters are using which language. Despite their differences in *form* and *delivery*, both shows demonstrate the value of non-English language to young audiences.

Publicists and reviewers of *Sagwa* describe the program not as a show for language acquisition, but as a show introducing children to elements of Chinese culture and strategies for navigating social situations. In their initial press release before the show's premier, PBS Publicity claims the series will empower children to make decisions and increase their cultural awareness. While the statement does not mention that the show features Mandarin, in the premier episode, language is a key component of characters' ability to exercise agency and practice cultural traditions. Lu Fang claims that the show's inclusion of cultural practices, including the art of calligraphy, are especially important given that many diasporic Chinese families struggle to impart Chinese values on their children (Fang 101-3). Again, though not specifically naming Mandarin as a language, Fang highlights calligraphy as an art, and I perceive the program using characters' discussions of the cultural importance of calligraphy to highlight the value of Mandarin writing proficiency. *Sensical*, a streaming service that hosts the full series, does mention Mandarin directly by listing "use of Chinese vocabulary" as a positive element of the show, but, in line with these

1. To avoid conflation with Chinese as an ethnic or cultural identity and since Mandarin is the dialect *Sagwa* features, I will refer to Mandarin Chinese as Mandarin for the remainder of this article.

2. For more on awards, see "Dora the Explorer (2000-2019) Awards" and page 102 of Fang. For more on international viewership, see pages 36-7 of Artze and pages 100-1 of Fang.

other characterizations of the show, the webpage more prominently boasts “positive messages” and “social studies” as the educational values imparted by the show. Though not advertising the series as a bilingual or language-learning program, these sources celebrate features that the show achieves through its presentation of Mandarin.

In contrast, responses to *Dora* from shortly after its release frequently reference the show’s bilingualism. Comments like “this pint-sized Latina heroine will have American families saying ‘gracias’ instead of ‘thank you’ in no time” and “it’s very empowering for kids to walk around the house saying ‘amigo’” express a belief that the show facilitates Spanish language acquisition for its viewers (Artze 37; Navarro C1). These comments, like those regarding *Sagwa*, have roots in the way the program presents language. In *Dora*, both English and Spanish are treated as target languages, the audience invited to repeat and use vocabulary from both languages in context. Frequent mentions of an increasing Spanish-speaking population in the United States also characterize initial responses to *Dora*. Writing for *Billboard*, Catherine Cella suggests that Paramount introduced the series as a business strategy to “capitalize” on an increased market for ethnically diverse programs (76). Her analysis shifts attention away from the educational and to the financial implications of the show, but also points to the program’s profitability caused by the willingness of English-speaking audiences to watch bilingual programs. Recognized as “the top-rated show for preschoolers, aged 2 to 5, in commercial television,” *Dora* attests to the viability of a show featuring a language besides English on television (Navarro C1).

Before analyzing the first episode of each program, I wondered whether it was useful to view these shows as language-learning resources. Recent scholarship on language acquisition through television is scarce, with a glaring lack of studies on the target age for both series: preschoolers. Majuddin et al. found that the use of subtitles and repetition increased adults’ retention of phrases in a target language (1001-2). Ina Lekkaï’s study of children aged nine to twelve found that participants did acquire phrases both with and without subtitles and that repeatedly encountering the phrases paired with relevant context and visuals made acquisition more likely (85-6). Neither researcher investigated Mandarin or Spanish as target languages. To determine whether *Sagwa* and *Dora* support language acquisition, research involving preschoolers and statistics on subtitle usage should be gathered. However, after examining the shows’ rhetorical use of language, I find that though these shows might or might not support children’s acquisition of target languages, these programs do beneficially communicate that proficiency in languages besides English is valuable.

Viewers watching the English version of the shows encounter non-English

language within the first thirty seconds of each premier. While in *Sagwa* this initial exposure is written, in *Dora* it is spoken, following the primary form the respective languages tend to appear in each series's first episode. "How Sagwa Got Her Colors" begins with a preview that shows Sagwa's parents using their tails to write Mandarin characters (0:03-5). They are recording a proclamation from the magistrate to ban singing, and the scene uses color to communicate meaning. One word on the proclamation, "禁," or "jin," a word commonly used on Mandarin signage to mean "ban" or "prohibit," appears in red while the other words are black. Here the show uses the visual element of color to communicate the meaning of the word to a non-Mandarin-speaking audience, which is important for understanding the episode since this is the word Sagwa later blots from the manuscript. Three seconds in, the visual rhetoric signals that written Mandarin will play an important role in the show.

Dora's first use of Spanish, on the other hand, is heard rather than seen. The theme song introduces its protagonists as "Boots and super cool exploradora" (0:19-23). Instead of referring to Dora by her name as was done with Boots, the line characterizes her as an "*exploradora*," or explorer ("*Explorador, ra*"). The syllable count of the Spanish term allows this line to match the ten-syllable line that came before, which would not have been possible with the name "Dora" alone. Including the term clues in a first-time audience that spoken Spanish will play a role in the cartoon. A further auditory message sent by the term comes from the similar sound between "*exploradora*," "*explorer*," and "Dora." Because the Spanish word sounds so similar to the other two terms that are more likely understood by an English-speaking audience, the term suggests a proximity between Spanish and English. As a result, this introduction of Spanish in an easily understandable, spoken *form* signals to the audience that they are about to hear Spanish and works to demystify the challenge of understanding Spanish for English speakers.

An early challenge Sagwa and her siblings face is understanding and articulating the value of written Mandarin, with a conversation about calligraphy first establishing that the ability to write in Mandarin has intergenerational, cultural value. Following the theme of cultural inheritance between parent and child that overarches Amy Tan's oeuvre, when Sagwa's older brother, Dongwa, questions why their parents would be "proud" of their practicing calligraphy, Sagwa reminds him of their "family tradition. We've always been calligraphers" (5:13-33). The idea of parental pride and family tradition is attached to calligraphy for Sagwa and her family because, as the parents later explain, their role as the magistrate's scribes is what allows them the privilege of living in a palace (8:01-50). Sagwa's respect for calligraphy further links her

to her parents when, after insisting that the family has “always” performed the role, Dongwa complains that she “sound[s] just like [their] father” (5:48-52). Besides being of value specifically to Sagwa’s family, engaging in Mandarin through calligraphy is also established as a cultural art. Dongwa says that he would prefer to practice “gungfu,” an English transliteration that sounds closer to the Mandarin “功夫” or “gōngfū” than the one more commonly used in America, “kung fu.” Although protesting writing, his stated preference juxtaposes gōngfū with calligraphy as two culturally important activities.

After first establishing Mandarin writing proficiency as important for family and culture, the episode conveys that this proficiency also grants power to and requires responsibility from individuals. Sagwa’s mother expresses displeasure about the unfairness of the law they transcribed, which bans singing. Her reaction raises the question of whether individuals, even when they have the capability to use written language to write or oral language to sing, actually have agency to use these skills as desired. When Sagwa falls in ink and accidentally marks out “jìn,” the Chinese people sing the magistrate’s praises, leading him to change his heart and extend resources to the dynasty’s cats. These circumstances affirm her belief that “we’re not helpless just because we’re cats. We can change the world!” (14:29-35). Engagement with writing in Mandarin allows Sagwa to make a change as an individual, but once Sagwa realizes this power, she must also exercise caution. Even though her altering of the manuscript had positive results, her mother clarifies that Sagwa “did something she shouldn’t have” but that sometimes “mistakes” can be useful learning opportunities (23:32-47). The inclusion of this clarification adds nuance to a message otherwise suggesting that if children use their voice to stand up for what is right, there necessarily will be positive results. Sagwa’s interference with someone else’s written message was risky, painting children the realistic picture that while command of language can facilitate change, writers cannot dictate how other people respond to their writing.

While language also has visual importance in *Dora*, that importance comes from the connection between images and spoken words rather than from written words. In fact, aside from when the series title is shown on-screen during the theme song, there are no written words in English or Spanish throughout the episode. The choice not to include text is particularly striking when Dora says that a book “is in Spanish,” but, when she shows the book on-screen, it includes pictures and no words (3:00-10). Because she references the book’s written language in her dialogue, but the book apparently has no text, the exclusion reads as a rhetorical choice to foreground spoken rather than written language. Throughout the episode, Dora implores viewers

to say English and Spanish words aloud to help her and Boots on their quest. These invitations to speak are often imperative commands like “you have to say ‘map,’” “we need your help to stop Swiper. You have to say ‘Swiper no swiping.’ Say it with us,” and “remember, you have to tell Señor Tucán which piece will fill in the hole in the bridge... *grande* for big, *piqueño* for little” (5:00-2; 8:45-52; 11:48-12:16). The repeated “have to” suggests an importance that the child speaks, and these commands are often paired with visuals indicative of the word’s meaning. For example, Dora gestures with arms wide to support understanding of the spoken word “grande” and narrows her arms to pantomime “piqueño” (11:58-12:06). While *Sagwa* suggests that written language can solve problems, *Dora* suggests the same of spoken language. Similar to *Sagwa*, *Dora* supports the spoken words’ meanings with visuals.

In addition to differing in the *form* in which they present the non-English language, these two shows also differ in their *delivery* of non-English lines, namely in which characters speak which language(s). *Sagwa* features a fully bilingual English-Mandarin cast of characters or at least includes no indication in the first episode that any of the characters are monolingual. In each scene where characters speak both English and Mandarin, no characters express confusion or ask for translations. Notably, “gungfu,” “māmā,” and “bàba” are the only Mandarin words spoken by the young cats, with longer and more complicated phrases reserved to the bat Fu-Fu and the adult human characters. *Sagwa* and the show’s audience are then placed in a position of listening to Mandarin but not necessarily speaking it back. Mandarin phrases are often accompanied by English phrases that either translate or explain meaning. A human character invites *Sagwa*’s parents to come forward in order to act as scribes by saying “Nǐ guòlái. Come here” (11:56-9). These two sentences have the same meaning, the former in Mandarin and latter in English. Although this *delivery* presents the audience with both languages, in each situation where the two languages are used to express the same meaning, there is never an overt statement that the one phrase means the same as the other. All of the spoken and many of the written phrases in the episode should be understood by someone with intermediate Mandarin proficiency, meaning that the inclusion of both could give language learners and children already exposed to Mandarin at home representation of a familiar language on-screen. Those unfamiliar with Mandarin likely will understand that another language is being paired with English, but the show is not explicit that lines in Mandarin are being directly translated into English.

In *Dora*, the process of translation is articulated overtly, made possible in part by the linguistic diversity among characters. Dora speaks both English and Spanish,

Boots can understand very little Spanish and otherwise speaks English, and some of the protagonists' peers are monolingual while others are bilingual. As a result of this variety of language proficiency, while, in *Sagwa*, the same character often delivers a line in both languages, in *Dora*, one character usually delivers a line in one language and another character in the other. For example, directed at the audience, Boots says "let's go" before Dora says "vamos" (7:10-3). Another time, Dora says "gracias" before Boots says "thanks" (2:46-9). Notable about these two examples is that they reverse the order of speaking. If English were always to come after Spanish, the *delivery* would act as a translation of Spanish favoring a non-Spanish-speaking audience. However, because the order of *delivery* varies, no language is prejudiced over the other in these moments. That is not to say that both languages are used equally throughout the episode, as English is used for a larger proportion of the dialogue. However, Boots is not presented in a position of power as the English-speaker by translating for Dora.

Actually, Boots understands little Spanish, making Dora's bilingualism a practical asset and causing the interaction between characters to capture situations children are likely to encounter in linguistically diverse environments. While *Sagwa* does convey that there are people who speak non-English languages, *Dora* carries that idea further, suggesting that preschoolers might meet people in their daily life who speak different languages. The protagonists' interaction with Señor Tucán dramatizes, through Boots's experience, meeting someone who speaks a different language, and, through Dora's, serving as a translator in the resulting conversation. Señor Tucán speaks Spanish, Boots speaks English, and Dora speaks both. Boots wants to ask for Señor Tucán's help fixing a bridge, since the character can fly to retrieve planks of wood from the river (11:15-33). Because the characters must cross the bridge to continue exploring, the ability to have a conversation is crucial. Although this particular scenario is fantastical, the reality of meeting someone who speaks a different language is likely for children in multilingual communities, and the show sends the positive message that bilingualism allows for collaboration and problem-solving. The realism of the scenario follows Nickelodeon Animation Studios' goal "to reflect the world children lived in" (Navarro C1). In contrast, *Sagwa* aims to depict for children "an enchanting world of customs and traditions," phrasing that indicates an intention to demonstrate that some people have different experiences rather than to represent an experience that viewers are likely to have (Publicity PBS).

Dora further illustrates bilingualism as an asset by resisting deficit terminology; rather than saying that a character does not speak a language, the dialogue addresses what language(s) that character does speak and presents that

language proficiency as a capability. When Boots experiences a language barrier with Señor Tucán, rather than saying that the bird *does not* speak English, Dora says “Señor Tucán speaks Spanish” (11:12-26). By stating the language he speaks rather than the language he does not speak, Dora models for children the behavior of highlighting language capability rather than deficiency, since speaking in terms of what language someone else does not know can be both presumptuous and hurtful. Words like “can” paired with fluency further the theme of language as capability. When showing Boots her book, Dora tells him “the book is in Spanish, but I can tell you what it says” (3:00-4). Her intonation, placing emphasis on “I,” confidently expresses to bilingual children that they have a skill that not all their peers have. Alisaari et al. found, in a study of teachers in Finland, that while most participants viewed multilingualism positively, not all of them viewed it as an asset for learning (48, 57). Dora does frame non-English language as an asset, defending the preservation of Spanish as a native language among American children who too often experience first-language attrition.

To be clear, *Dora's* exploration of bilingualism to navigate social situations does not make the program more useful than *Sagwa*. Rather, these episodes each highlight different aspects of the value of language. While *Dora* focuses on the communicative power of non-English spoken language, *Sagwa* highlights the cultural importance and community impact of written Mandarin proficiency. Both shows call the viewer to situate themselves in the narrative, ensuring that they are not passive. After the adventure, Dora asks the audience “what was your favorite part of the trip?” waits for a response, then validates it with “I liked that too” (22:50-23:03). Similarly conversational, in a segment after the main storyline, Fu-Fu and Sagwa tell the audience “No matter what type of neighborhood, people all over the world live in great places. What about you?” (26:25-32). By inviting children to articulate how they relate to the episode using spoken words, both shows encourage viewers to make meaning using language.

Researchers should continue examining how children's programs communicate the value of non-English languages. Audiovisual media involves rhetorically shaped messages that contribute to a child's early understanding of the world. With the current shift in popularity from network television to streaming and video-sharing platforms comes much new material worth analysis. Some people who watched *Sagwa* and *Dora* as children are currently or about to become young educators, myself included. It is important to be conscientious when representing languages to children, as these portrayals send a message about how the child should view their own and others' skills. *Sagwa* and *Dora* remain useful for their indication

Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat and *Dora the Explorer* Teach the Value of Non-English Language

that linguistic diversity is not only a reality, but that non-English proficiency is a powerful skill.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alisaari, Jenni, et al. "Monolingual Ideologies Confronting Multilingual Realities. Finnish Teachers' Beliefs about Linguistic Diversity." *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 80, Apr. 2019, pp. 48–58. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1016/j.tate.2019.01.003>.
- Artze, Isis. "Building Characters." *Hispanic*, vol. 13, no. 10, Oct. 2000, p. 36-44. *EBSCOhost*, search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=3667028&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Cella, Catherine. "For Kids' Video, Ethnic Titles Are More Than a Niche Market." *Billboard*, vol. 113, no. 23, June 2001, p. 76. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebSCOhost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=4535233&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Chaston, Joel D. "'It is My Earliest Memory': Audience, Literary Adaptation, and Cultural Representation in Amy Tan's Writing for Young Readers." *Critical Insights: Amy Tan*. Edited by West, Kathryn, and Linda Trinh Moser, Salem Press/Grey House Publishing, 2021, pp. 121-36.
- "Dora the Explorer Debuts Today on Noggin, Nickelodeon's Preschool Subscription Service." *Nickelodeon Press*, 1 Sept. 2017, nickpress.com/press-releases/2017/09/01/dora-the-explorer-debuts-today-on-noggin-nickelodeons-preschool-subscription-service.
- "Dora the Explorer (2000-2019) Awards." *IMDb*, m.imdb.com/title/tt0235917/awards/?ref_=tt_awd.
- "Explorador, ra, m. & f. (1)." *The New Velázquez Spanish and English Dictionary*, Velázquez Press, 2003, p. 443.
- Fang, Lu. "Globalization and Identity Formation: A Cross-Cultural Reading of Amy Tan's *Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat*." *East-West Identities: Globalization, Localization, and Hybridization*. Brill, 2007. doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004151697.i-404.40.
- Ina, Lekkai. "Incidental Foreignn-Langugae Acquisition by Children Watching Subtitled Television Programs." *TOJET: The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, vol. 13, no. 4, Oct. 2014, pp. 81-7. *ERIC*, eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1043240.
- Majuddin, Elvenna, et al. "Incidental Acquisition of Multiword Expressions through Audiovisual Materials: The Role of Repetition and Typographic Enhancement." *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, vol. 43, no. 5, Dec. 2021, pp. 985–1008. *EBSCOhost*, doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1017/S0272263121000036.
- Moss, Marilyn. "Sagwa, Siamese Cat." *Hollywood Reporter*, vol. 369, no. 42, Aug.

2001. *EBSCOhost*, bi-gale-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/essentials/article/GALE%7CA78360775/ec191a4ec7f919dc1e6960289bee9c0b?u=tel_middleten.

Navarro, Mireya. "Nickelodeon's Bilingual Cartoon *Dora* is a Hit." *New York Times*, 2 July 2001, p. C1. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A76146227/AONE?u=tel_middleten&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=ca6eebe9.

PBS Publicity. "Amy Tan's *Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat*, Produced by Cinegroup in Association With Children's Television Workshop and IF/XProductions, is Coming Daily to PBS Kids." *PBS*. 17 Aug. 2020. [3 pbs.org/about/about-pbs/blogs/news/amy-tans-sagwa-the-chinese-siamese-cat-produced-by-cinegroupe-in-association-with-childrens-television-workshop-and-ifx-productions-is-coming-daily-to-pbs-kids-january-19-2000/](https://www.pbs.org/about/about-pbs/blogs/news/amy-tans-sagwa-the-chinese-siamese-cat-produced-by-cinegroupe-in-association-with-childrens-television-workshop-and-ifx-productions-is-coming-daily-to-pbs-kids-january-19-2000/).³

"*Sagwa the Chinese Siamese Cat*." *Sensical*, sensical.tv/shows/sagwa-the-chinese-siamese-cat.

Tan, Amy, creative consultant. "How *Sagwa* Got Her Colors." *Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat*, season 1, episode 1, CinéGroupe/Sesame Workshop, 3 Sept. 2001. *Sensical*.

Weiner, Eric, writer. "The Legend of the Big Red Chicken." *Dora the Explorer*, season 1, episode 1, Nickelodeon Animation Studios/Paramount Home Entertainment, 14 Aug. 2000. *Paramount Plus*.

3. PBS Publicity first published this press release on 19 Jan. 2000, before the release of the show, and last updated the article on 17 Aug. 2020.