Presidential Address 2009: English Is Not Enough

CATHERINE PORTER

THIS MOMENT HAS BEEN LOOMING FOR THREE YEARS NOW, EVER since I heard the election results, and the complicated feelings that arose then are still in place. Amazement, first of all, because it's still hard to believe that a translator from SUNY Cortland could stand at this podium. Awe and humility, for sure, because I know something about my illustrious predecessors and how far I am from filling their shoes. A bit of sheer terror, too: I suspect that comes with the territory. But most of all, gratitude, immense gratitude, for the opportunity to collaborate with the extraordinary colleagues that make this huge, multifaceted association work so well. By colleagues I mean in particular the past two presidents and the two current vice presidents, with whom I've worked closely and from whom I've learned so much; the Executive Council members, all stars in their own right who know how to work productively as a team and have fun in the process; and especially our inspiring and gifted leader Rosemary G. Feal and her formidable staff. I can't name them all, but I want to thank them all, to acknowledge and applaud their integrity and intelligence, their creativity and commitment, their people skills and their many other skills that keep this big ship on course. The association is going through hard financial times, as you know, but we're in excellent hands, and I'm confident that we'll emerge from the ordeal leaner, perhaps, but stronger than ever.

I'd like to plunge into my topic not quite by telling jokes but simply by recalling a couple of classic ones: the famous claim that "if English was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for everybody" and a well-known riddle: if someone who speaks three languages is trilingual and someone with two languages is bilingual, what do we call someone who speaks only one language? Right: an American. While these chestnuts

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may still provoke chuckles, they should also remind us that as educators we may need to work harder at communicating our understanding of how languages evolve, how translation works, why no single language is good enough for anyone. The wry, self-mocking humor of jokes like these brings home an uncomfortable truth: despite the occasional well-intentioned gesture to the contrary—for example, the recent creation of the position of deputy assistant secretary for international and foreign language education (Higher Educ. Opportunity Act 3460)—as a nation we still choose to remain overwhelmingly monolingual.

In an ADFL Summer Seminar paper in 2002, later published in *Profession*, the then MLA vice president, Mary Louise Pratt, called on her colleagues—that is, all of us—to build "a new public idea about language." Tonight I want to extend Pratt's argument and try to make the case that for residents of the United States, competence in the English language is necessary but not sufficient: that it would be to our national and personal advantage if every American had the opportunity to become bilingual as a matter of course, if our public idea about language embraced bilingualism as an educational norm. I shall use the elastic term *bilingual* in a broad sense here to refer to anyone who functions in more than one language (Mackey).

We live in a world of polyglot nations. From one recent compilation of world languages, we can infer that multilingualism is overwhelmingly the rule rather than the exception ("Languages"). Of the 206 countries included on that list ("country" being broadly defined), only 12 are characterized as having just one language. At the other extreme, Indonesia is said to have some 580 languages and dialects, Papua New Guinea 715 or more. Overall, two or more languages are spoken in ninety-four percent of the world's countries, and more than two-thirds of the world's children grow up in bilingual environments (Bhatia and Ritchie 1).

The MLA Language Map, based on data from the 2005 census, shows that in the United States over eighty percent of the population five and older speak English at home, while under twenty percent speak a different language (the map identifies ninety-five distinct languages and eight additional language clusters). Three-quarters of those who speak a language other than English at home, or almost fifteen percent of the total United States population five and older, also reportedly speak English well or very well. This brings the proportion of English speakers to over ninety-five percent; in other words, fewer than five percent of the population speak English not very well or not at all. So there seems little reason for anxiety about the status of English in the United States today. As a nation founded by immigrants and enriched by successive waves of immigration over the centuries, we continue—quite rightly—to emphasize the importance of English as our common language, an essential tool for assimilation and full participation in our society. But what leads us to suppose that English alone is *enough* for Americans? What makes a polyglot country like the United States so reluctant to encourage multilingualism? Part of the answer, as I see it, lies in a vicious circle that has arisen in our educational system.

In public education in the United States, we typically wait until early adolescence to introduce schoolchildren to their first foreign language. We start with small doses and don't usually offer, let alone require, extended sequences. Our teachers have often had a late start themselves, and they don't always have much opportunity outside the classroom to extend their own language skills. Articulation between high school and college foreign language programs is haphazard at best. College language requirements are perceived by many students as obstacles to be avoided or impositions to be endured. Thus, generation after generation, our society produces large numbers of adult citizens who have never tried to

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learn another language or who see themselves as having tried and failed. Little wonder that many Americans come to believe, consciously or not, that it's just too hard to learn a second language and that it's therefore not worth the effort and expense to make foreign language study an essential component of the public school curriculum.

This attitude correlates with a set of tacit assumptions about language learning that appear to underlie fundamental public policy decisions about language teaching:

- Native speakers of English don't need to know any other language: they can get by with English pretty much everywhere; most foreign diplomats, scientists, and business representatives speak English.
- The country can produce competent speakers of any given language for diplomatic, military, or commercial purposes when the need arises, through rapid, intensive training of adults.
- Immigrants should learn English as a replacement language and not attempt to maintain their previous languages; bilingual education programs should therefore be transitional, enabling young students to use English exclusively as soon as possible.
- It's fine to expose native speakers of English to a foreign language in school when conditions allow, but this is not a priority; foreign languages, like music and art, are optional extras that can be cut back or eliminated when budgets are tight.

These interrelated assumptions constitute an all-too-American ideology of monolingual sufficiency, largely based, it appears, on a limited, instrumental notion of need, and the assumptions are complicit, I submit, with a restrictive, homogenized notion of American identity. Are these assumptions sustainable? It is true that English, or a limited form of English, has become a lingua franca in many parts of the world and may suffice for superficial transactions in touristic situations; it is not true that English is enough for exchanges in diplomatic, military, professional, or commercial contexts where matters of consequence are at stake. The in-depth cultural knowledge and understanding that come with mastery of a second language are almost a prerequisite for being taken seriously in many circumstances. Whether English-only speakers are dealing with counterparts who speak their language well or working through interpreters, as monolinguals they are always at a disadvantage: they risk violating social taboos, tend to miss subtle verbal and nonverbal cues, cannot follow side conversations, and in general are less well equipped than their bilingual or multilingual interlocutors to put themselves in others' places—to figure out where others are coming from, what they are getting at or even trying to get away with.

As for the assumption that we can wait to produce fluent speakers of other languages until a specific need arises, it is certainly true that adult learners can develop bilingual competency, given adequate time and training; however, the process is time-consuming, costly, and—tellingly—likely to work best with motivated candidates who have prior successful experience with language learning. It is difficult, if not impossible, to predict which languages will be of crucial importance in the future (I don't suppose many people of my generation foresaw the importance of studying Dari or Pashto), but it is possible to prepare a critical mass of people who are not daunted by the prospect of learning an additional language because they've already done so at least once.

Against this background, the "transitional" approach to bilingual education seems positively perverse. We take children who are ideally positioned to become functioning bilinguals and tell them in effect that we want them to be monolinguals, that we don't think they can handle more than one language. In the process, we weaken their ties to their family and community of origin and put their

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self-esteem at risk by deprecating their home language and culture. Our failure to support immigrant populations in the effort to develop full fluency in English *and* the home language wastes human capital, impoverishing the individuals involved and society at large.

The point can be made more broadly: our failure to encourage and facilitate second-language learning throughout the population results in a devastating waste of potential. The benefits of bilingualism to the individual are increasingly attested by researchers in fields ranging from educational psychology and cognitive studies to neuroscience. Public school students who have had an early start in a long-sequence foreign language program consistently display enhanced cognitive abilities relative to their monolingual peers: these include pattern recognition, problem solving, divergent thinking, flexibility, and creativity. After three or four years of second-language instruction, they perform better on standardized tests, not only in verbal skills (in both languages) but also in math. They demonstrate enhanced development in metalinguistic and critical thinking: they can compare and contrast languages, analyze the way language functions in different contexts, and appreciate the way it can be used for special purposes, from advertising and political propaganda to fiction and poetry. In short, they have an edge in the higher-order thinking skills that will serve them well as postsecondary students and as citizens.

What accounts for these remarkable benefits? Does foreign language study itself have an impact on brain physiology? While we still have a lot to learn, there are intriguing clues. Experiments have shown, for example, that foreign language study increases brain density in the left inferior parietal cortex ("Learning"). Ongoing research suggests that bilinguals and monolinguals process languages differently in some respects. Bilinguals may take more advantage of the neural structures involved in processing language and other cognitive content. They appear to have a greater ability to shut out distractions and focus on the task at hand. It is clear that the demands made on the brain by language learning, like other demands that involve encountering the unexpected, make the brain more flexible and incite it to discover new patterns and thus to create and maintain more circuits (Carey). The effort involved in learning and controlling more than one language may even train the brain in a way that slows down the losses that often come with aging; indeed, a recent Canadian report indicates that dementia may be delayed by as much as four years in bilingual adults who use both languages regularly ("Bilingualism"). Virtually all "brain fitness" experts include foreign language study among the activities that may help delay the onset of dementia.

In the context of formal schooling, studies suggest that the ideal window for introducing a second language extends from prekindergarten through third grade, partly because of the well-known plasticity of young brains but also because, as with a first language, extended exposure is needed for mastery. The advantages to an early start are demonstrable. Ellen Bialystok and Kenji Hakuta report in their key text on second language acquisition, *In Other Words*, that at first "older learners and adults make more rapid progress than younger learners, but, over time, the older learners reach a plateau earlier and are overtaken" by the younger ones (80). It would be misleading to speak of a precisely delimited critical period for second-language learning. In the last few decades we have come a long way in adapting foreign language pedagogy to the learner's age and developmental stage. Young children appear to learn best through what specialists call "global, multimodal, and differentiated methodologies," while adolescents and adults are thought to learn best through a more analytic approach (Caccavale). Puberty seems to bring a drop-off in the ability to acquire a nativelike accent for many children: this phenomenon is

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attested by statistics, although the degree to which it has a biological basis is still under investigation, and in any case some studies (as well as some personal experience—I myself didn't start studying French until I was fifteen) suggest that motivation to become indistinguishable from native speakers can trump age-related factors.

Mary Louise Pratt and many other professionals rightly assert that it is never too early and never too late to begin foreign language study. But adults can choose whether or not to avail themselves of opportunities to do this; the children in our society depend on us—on school boards, legislatures, educational organizations, federal agencies, the body politic—to create contexts in which foreign languages will be learned. It is hard to see why we would not want to give all children the enhanced cognitive capacities attributable to bilingualism, especially at a time when there is a growing perception that Americans are being outperformed in the international arena on several measures of educational attainment and thus at risk of losing a crucial competitive advantage. In the Asian and European countries that have caught up to or surpassed the United States in educational achievement, the elementary school curriculum almost universally includes systematic foreign language study (European Union; Pufahl, Rhodes, and Christian), while in the United States the number of elementary schools offering any foreign language study decreased between 1997 and 2008, from thirty-one percent to twenty-five percent (Rhodes and Pufahl 1–2).

In the light of this disturbing comparison, which for some may conjure up memories of the national reaction to *Sputnik* in the 1950s, can we perceive conditions conducive to collective action? In 2006 the Committee for Economic Development issued a report stressing the importance of international studies for the economic and international security of the United States. The report's introduction strikes a note of urgency:

> We are now at a critical moment in our history. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks demonstrated to many Americans that movements from across the globe impact our country in ways never before imagined. Despite America's status as an economic, military and cultural superpower, we risk becoming narrowly confined within our own borders, lacking the understanding of the world around us that is essential to our continued leadership role in the world community.
>
> (Research and Policy Committee vii)

The report recommends that the training pipeline be expanded "at every level of education to address the paucity of Americans fluent in foreign languages" (2–3).

Our current economic predicament complicates this project while making it more urgent than ever. In a recent op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, Thomas Friedman cites a businessman, Todd Martin, who claims that "our education failure is the largest contributing factor to the decline of the American worker's global competitiveness"; Friedman goes on to argue that our schools need to send forth students who not only read, write, and do arithmetic adequately but also can solve problems creatively. Every schoolchild whose ability to think critically and creatively is increased by the boost in cerebral capacity that serious and sustained foreign language study occasions is a future adult who may bring new perspectives to bear on the problems that confront our globalized world, climate change and economic instability being just two obvious examples. Producing a multilingual—as opposed to a merely polyglot—population would give us a vast pool of bilingual speakers able to function in any number of world languages and able to learn others quickly. The dynamics of what we now call bilingual education would change dramatically: if multilingualism became a national goal and eventually a reality, children from non-English-speaking backgrounds could be proud of their bilingualism; their acquisition of English would be

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normalized, part of a larger process in which native speakers of English were also acquiring second languages. We would produce citizens with enhanced intercultural awareness better able to interact with sensitivity and insight in multilingual, multicultural contexts. We could do all this while developing more nimble thinkers, more competent problem solvers, more agile users of language.

We could do all this by establishing second-language competency as a national goal and incorporating foreign language study into the core K–12 curriculum. There are many time-tested models we could follow, successful programs of long standing in communities scattered throughout the United States. To my mind, the most attractive in many respects is the immersion model, in which instruction is delivered exclusively in the new language starting as early as kindergarten. Typically, all content areas—including the language itself—are taught in the new language for the first three or four years, after which English is introduced as a core subject. Two-way immersion programs work well in communities where there are many native speakers of a single foreign language—for example, Spanish, Arabic, or Mandarin. But immersion is by no means the only viable approach. A foreign language can be introduced as a core subject as late as grade 3 with good results, provided that enough time is set aside for it in the school day and provided that the language is maintained in the core curriculum in subsequent years in a carefully articulated way.[1]

Clearly, there are big hurdles to jump in implementing an elementary foreign language program in a given community. The choice of language itself can be contentious. Finding qualified teachers is often a stumbling block. Articulation with existing middle and secondary school programs can entail major curricular adjustments for the teachers involved. These are essentially practical problems, though, to which solutions have been or can be found. Securing adequate start-up funding is often the biggest hurdle of all; nevertheless, a recent report from the Center for Applied Linguistics on the disappointing decline in elementary language programs concludes on a potentially positive note: "When legislators, administrators, and other education policy makers recognize the need to incorporate foreign languages into the core curriculum, the necessary funding and other resources will follow" (Rhodes and Pufahl 7). The task before us, then, is still the one to which Pratt pointed: building a new public idea about language.

Are the repeated calls for increased attention to foreign language study just voices in the wilderness, or do they have a chance of being heard? One reason a transformation in thinking about language and a resultant shift in educational norms may be somewhat more conceivable now than they were even a few years ago is that evolving political and economic realities are forcing us to see ourselves and the place of the United States on the world stage differently, less presumptuously, than in recent memory. We might take heart, too, from observing other social changes that have accompanied or resulted from fundamental shifts in public attitudes over the last several decades, such as the decline in smoking or the evolution in women's roles traced by Gail Collins in her recent book *When Everything Changed*. The practical question we face as members of the Modern Language Association is the extent to which, through our association as it collaborates with others, but also as individual professionals and citizens, we are prepared to assume a leading role as advocates for this change in the public idea about language, to serve as active proponents of this awakening to the value of bilingualism.

For teachers of modern languages, including English, incentives for rallying to this cause are not hard to envision. Let me ask you to imagine for a moment a future in which most of our postsecondary students come with twelve or thirteen years of sustained, serious foreign language study behind them. Their

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foreign language professors will find that they haven't all achieved mastery or native fluency, but they will be experienced language learners, prepared for advanced study if they choose to go on in the same language, efficient and motivated if they choose to start a new one. Their English professors will find that they have a comparative grasp of the structures of the English language, an informed appreciation of its capabilities and limitations, and an approach to English-language literature nourished by prior experience with literary texts from a different tradition. All their instructors will find them experienced in thinking and talking about language and culture as such and accustomed to stepping outside their own systems to compare and contrast and perform other tasks we associate with critical thinking.

A fundamental insight that experience with more than one language reinforces is that language is a vehicle of expression and representation deployed by speakers and writers as they construct their own worlds. Each language does the job differently, puts into play its own approach to filtering perceived realities and its own tools for individual expression in a language-structured relation to those realities. To experience the contrast of differing languages and their distinct expressive resources is to learn valuable lessons in humility, tolerance, and sensitivity to other peoples and cultures.

Thomas Rochon, a political scientist and president of Ithaca College, tells a revealing story about his doctoral research in the Netherlands, where he went to interview politicians, union leaders, and community activists. His Dutch was not as strong as their English, for the most part, but he found out something important early on:

> When I insisted on Dutch and they began to speak in that language, they became different people: less formal, more revealing, more nuanced in their thinking, and able to say things about Dutch social and political relationships which they probably would not have been able to express had they been speaking English. Given the aspects of Dutch public life I was trying to understand, their inability to express themselves would not have been a reflection of their limitations so much as a reflection of the limitation of English itself as a language that has no need to describe some varieties of ideological antipathies and negotiations that are everyday matters in the Netherlands.

Until we can stand outside our mother tongue, as Tom Rochon did, and compare its ways and means of constructing the world with those of another language, we lack a vantage point for understanding the confining hold any single language exerts as an instrument of representation. The critical capacity of bilingual individuals, stemming from their awareness of alternative systems, lies in their ability to factor the differences between languages and linguistic worlds into their own representations of the larger multinational, multilingual world.

Let me take a moment to invoke the complicity, at once obvious and somewhat paradoxical, between a new focus on bilingualism and the attention to translation that I've tried to promote this year. Suppose the prevailing view of language in our society was indeed modified by a turn toward bilingualism. How might such a change affect the status of translation in our disciplines? Tonight, as I veer toward my conclusion, I can only evoke the horizon of a substantial answer and invite you to reflect further on the question.

Access to the full richness and complexity of human experience depends crucially on immersion in other languages and in the differences in perception, understanding, and communicative relations that they bring into play. Studying another language and reading literature in translation can both provide access to otherness. But the otherness in translations is often concealed or obliterated. Publishers don't like to advertise the fact of translation, reviewers tend to ignore it, read-

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ers typically remain oblivious, and even instructors carefully analyzing the work of a translated author sometimes fail to point out to students that they are reading the work of another person, a translator who rendered a version of the original—one of an infinite number of possible versions—with full awareness that a translated text cannot perfectly reflect the source.

Teaching literature in translation has been criticized as an appropriative or colonizing strategy that English departments of yesteryear used for the purpose of annexing the whole of world literature and, as it were, naturalizing or anglicizing it, diluting its distinctiveness, imposing on it the poverty of a monolingual universe. Yet the use of translations is justifiable not only as a practical necessity but also as a heuristic device that enables the teacher-scholar to stress the linguistic singularity of the original and to present the text of the translation as an act of critical interpretation. Instructors who lack direct access to the language of the original can do this by comparing a variety of translations, or by bringing in a guest lecturer who can provide a comparative analysis of key passages, or even by calling on the expertise of bilingual students when circumstances allow.[2] The critical point is that the fact of translation needs to be acknowledged and understood in the wake of and through the bilingual's experience with translation, even if this experience is limited to the earlier stages of foreign language study—remember, I began with an inclusive definition of bilingualism! After all, anyone who has seriously attempted to learn another language has realized that to know any language in its intricacy is at some point to translate it and to translate into it, to encounter the untranslatable within and without, to mark the gains and losses and compensatory strategies inherent in translation, to discover the ways in which languages converge and diverge. The success of a literary translation derives in large part from attention to the specificity—or, one could say, the strangeness—of each language's resources for artful articulation. It is incumbent on us, then, when we teach literary, historical, or philosophical texts in translation, to remind our interlocutors that a translated text needs to be apprehended through multiple lenses.[3]

Bilinguals use more than one lens daily; their horizons are widened and their lives enriched by the ability to embrace difference and find joy in the play within, between, and around languages that stepping outside one's mother tongue allows. Few if any other intellectual achievements open more doors in the mind, in the heart, and in the world than learning to understand and speak another language. And few produce a more profound or lasting satisfaction. There is pleasure to be had even in the blunders and misunderstandings that arise in the learning process and regularly thereafter for those engaged in code switching, as I know myself from a recent attempt to learn Swedish and as Doris Sommer argues in her provocative book *Bilingual Aesthetics*: "Living in two or more competing languages troubles the expectation that communication should be easy, and it upsets the desired coherence of romantic nationalism and ethnic essentialism. This can be a good thing," Sommer contends, and I couldn't agree more (19). It is a good thing that need not and should not remain the privilege of an elite.

A comprehensive rationale for an expanded commitment to foreign language study is articulated in the MLA *Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature*. This report asserts decisively that "[m]ultilingualism and multiculturalism have become a necessity for most world citizens" and that "all students who major in our departments should know English and at least one other language" (10).[4] The report's call for us to pursue this goal in rethinking our programs in postsecondary education can be extended into a professional mandate to help move the bilingual agenda

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forward nationally by collaborating with other groups that support foreign language study, international education, transregional scholarly initiatives, and the humanities more broadly. Without underestimating the difficulties involved, I contend that it is time for us to embrace this mandate and make our voices heard, collectively and individually, in a sustained and vigorous effort to persuade all stakeholders in the American educational enterprise that English is not enough.

Notes

1. For models of successful programs and advocacy strategies, see especially the National Network for Early Language (www.nnell.org).

2. David Damrosch's anthology *Teaching World Literature* suggests a wide variety of approaches to this task.

3. The task of translating literature or other artful prose beckons toward a significant lens that, for want of time, I do not take up here: that of (un)translatability, as it is addressed, for example, in Cassin. The key point is that what makes certain concepts untranslatable—and makes translatability a criterion applicable to ideas and arguments rather than to words and phrases—is the immersion of their meanings in terminological networks that do not simply cross from one language into another. The translator has to identify such networks and compare them, but the translation cannot reproduce those of the original; instead, it produces compromise formations that work in the target language. A strong appreciation of cross-lingual difference requires assimilating and analyzing the semantic networks of at least two languages.

4. Here is the crux of the rationale: "Our political and social lives are not 'English only' domestically or internationally. The value of fluency in multiple languages cannot be overstated in the twenty-first century, when the emergent conditions of life bring more of us more often into circumstances that, on the one hand, ask us to travel through the complex terrain of a globalized economy and, on the other, bring far-flung local parochialisms to our doors through the vastly expanded reach of new communications technologies. Students who study languages other than English are achieving not merely formal communication but also sophistication with the nuances of culture—both in the sense of culture as art, music, and poetics and the broader sense of culture as way of life. The translator, international lawyer, or banker who successfully conducts business in a language other than his or her native tongue shows linguistic capacity and cultural understanding, something a university education in languages is uniquely capable of instilling" (10–11).

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