VOL. 2, №2 JANUARY 2007 ISSN 1991-2773

TYPESETTING: EX MACHINA EDITIONS, Poland
e-mail: info@exmachina.pl

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SPECIAL ISSUE:

AMERICAN STUDIES AND THE DILEMMAS OF MULTILINGUALISM

THANKS TO MANY, ONE

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Harvard University professor of Romance Languages and Literatures Doris Sommer has graciously granted us permission to republish an excerpt from her widely acclaimed book Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education *(Duke University Press, 2004). The excerpt is taken from the third chapter entitled 'Irritate the State', in which Sommer suggests a middle way between abstract liberalism and particularist identity politics by highlighting the democratizing effect playing of bilingual games and creolization. Her provocative plea to 'teach a taste for irritation' seems to disturb the agenda of both liberal political philosophy and multicultural aesthetics in that it propagates respect for minority languages even while underscoring the sociopolitical relevance of a neutral but flexible lingua franca. Sommer's thesis about the importance of bilingual puns and double-talk as counterpoints to the monovocalism of the modern nation-state directly impinges on the issue of language in American Studies as a globalizing field of study. We hereby offer it to the reader as an 'irritating' stimulus for further debate.*

Allow me to defend an analogy between many religions and many languages, in order to bring home—after calls for jihad and crusade—the stabilizing effect of overloaded state systems. Overloads, obviously, are also the precondition for what Rawls called 'overlapping consensus' among peoples (Rawls, 1993). It is true, as Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka among others object, that culture (let's say language as the basic part for the whole) and religion behave differently with respect to politics. Religion can be private and separate from the state; but a particular language is a public medium for the state.

Politics cannot decouple from a language nor, therefore, can it be culturally neutral. All the more reason for vigilance and testing against strange cultures. The difference between public language and private church is significant, but difference doesn't dismiss an analogy. Analogy shows points of divergence as well as contact, Wittgenstein observed. Otherwise, comparison would be too close or too far-fetched to produce the witty (unanticipated but irresistible) relationship that we call analogy. It is the figure that describes genre for Wittgenstein, not the particular rule that governs a game, but the similarity of rule-making systems that establishes gaming or identifies an activity. Different rule-bound activities, gaming and drawing, are themselves linked by analogy: 'The kinship [of games] is that of two pictures, one of which consists of color patches with vague contours, and the other of patches similarly shaped and distributed, but with clear contours. The kinship is just as undeniable as the difference' (Wittgenstein, 1997: #76). It is the difference that goes without saying.

The link I wish to show between language and religion is the effect of multiplicity on both. The effect is aesthetic because it estranges (or decouples) any particular language or religion from the presumption that it is natural or necessary. Multiplicity makes you notice that your own language or religion is one option among others, not the only legitimate vehicle for human life. Estrangement can provoke anxiety, of course, but it can also jog reflection about the artifice of society and perhaps about the normal proliferation of artful constructions. I grant that unhinging one cultural term (language or religion) from 'natural' moorings is not the same as separating two different terms like public and private[1]. But defamiliarizing one's own unexamined practices and beliefs cannot be irrelevant to politics. Two reasons come to mind: First, estrangement develops irony (which is close to tolerance). Estrangement may even develop a taste for the unfamiliar aesthetico-political goads to the pleasures of reflection. Distaste for reflection in the United States keeps the country from ratifying accords for international rights, including the Convention on Rights of Children. But under the pressure of cultural pluralism, Thomas McCarthy notes, institutional arrangements sometimes change and law becomes reflexive (McCarthy, 1999: 205). Taylor's hope for a Gadamerian 'fusion of horizons' where 'the other becomes less strange' would reduce anxiety and along with it the knack—and the kick—of reflection (Taylor, 1996: 20). And second, overloads of linguistic and religious constructions can be unmanageable and therefore demand coordination at a different, political, level.

If you think about it, the separation of Church and State works when there is more than one church, each irritating the others. Different religious beliefs don't amount to a unified system that might stand in for state power, so that in practice, churches stay separate from government when there are too many to speak for the general body public. James Madison was unequivocal on this distinction. Religion was both a problem for politics and its own solution, because the cacophony of beliefs ensured so much conflict that a secular government and civil society became necessary structures of coordination[2]. Thanks to religious incommensurabilities, secular society stayed secure because the overload and excess of religious meanings demanded an order of coordination that politics can provide[3]. In a similar way, I am suggesting that multilingualism demands an agile *lingua franca*. Competing churches and multiple languages keep any one culture from overlapping with politics in ways that might stifle its breath. Politics is robust and hard at work when it coordinates

[1] William Connolly thinks this distinction too artificial and impractical. See his article 'Refashioning the Secular' (2000), where the case for 'pluralizing' participation in the public sphere includes admitting religious voices.

[2] 'Here it was Madison I think, who better grasped the unique implications and consequences that the commitment to disestablishment would have for the constitution of American civil society. In part, this was because he predicated his general solution to the overarching problem of 'curing the mischief of faction' on the empirical evidence that the existing multiplicity of sects had already promoted the general security of religious liberty that he now hoped to advance in an even more principled and consistent way. As the classic formulation of *Federalist* 51 asserts: 'In a free government, the security for civil rights must be the same as that for religious rights. It consists in the one case in the multiplicity of interests, and in the other, in the multiplicity of sects' (*Federalist* 51, quoted in Rakove, 2001: 253).

[3] Today, though, Brian Barry is sure that anarchism would prevail. See his *Culture & Equality* (2001: 133).

many cultures through the law. If there were no need to coordinate, if culture were only one, how might we see or hear the difference between culture and universal political institutions?

In other words, when politics is singular and culture is plural, decoupling makes sense, despite the skeptics. Then languages, religions, etc. need administration instead of offering a 'natural' vehicle for it. Is the majoritarian language a practical choice for the *lingua franca*? Then members of the majority should learn at least one more language, in order to reflect on political convenience and to feel creatively distracted by divergent grammatical (relational) constructions.

Contemporary theorists have taken a lead from Madison in order to credit the inharmonious churches for helping to establish secular democracy[4]. Can we credit multilingualism for keeping democracy hard at work? Harmonizing is the name for top-down control through diversity management in the European Union (Bennett, 1998: 7). Instead of dismissing religious choice as indifferent for democracies, and urging away ethnic or racial 'choices' in preference for an ideal, color-blind liberalism[5], religious conflicts and language differences can actually enhance democracy by forcing a bright line between cultural practices and administrative procedures.

The 'negative moment' of the analogy comes, obviously, from the fact that everyone speaks some language(s) but by now not everyone belongs to a church or believes in God (despite salutes to the flag, emblems on money, and inspired speeches). At independence, United States religious sectarianism was the irritant around which liberal politics developed, like a pearl around a grain of sand. Today, one incentive to roughen and refresh politics comes from the 'foreign' languages that both irritate English and require it as the *lingua franca*. Despite all the theory that comes from Canada, it is not, in my opinion, the best model of irritation, except maybe for the big cities where multicultural immigration makes trouble for official bilingualism. The reason is structural, not specific to Canada: official bilingualism doesn't require one *lingua franca*; instead it frustrates under-represented (French) speakers and bothers the (Anglophone) majority that perceives no need for a second language. Debates get stuck between communitarian authenticity from the minority viewpoint and personal freedom from the majority. Any bilingual country, including a possible (but unlikely) United States were Spanish recognized, can polarize like this. Switzerland and Belgium are no better models: A typical joke about Belgium is a series of riddles: 'What do you call a person who speaks three languages? Trilingual. And someone who speaks two languages? Bilingual. What about a person who speaks one language? Waloon' (Grosjean, 1982: 20).

Instead of Canada, think of India, as Robert Dahl does when he considers why democracy works there, in so linguistically complicated a country. It works, he says, precisely because it's *so complicated* that people don't understand one another with-

[4] See for example, Rawls: 'While most of the American colonies had known establishments of some kind (Congregationalist in New England, Episcopalian in the South), the United States, *thanks to the plurality of its religious sects* and the First Amendment which they endorsed, never did. A persecuting zeal has been the great curse of the Christian religion' (Rawls, 1999: 166, note 75; my emphasis).

[5] 'Let us agree that ethnic and racial affiliation should be as voluntary as religious affiliation, and of as little concern to the state and public authority' (Glazer 1997: 159).

out the *lingua franca* and its administrative institutions[6]. Thomas L. Friedman concurs, to the point of holding up India as a model of secular civility between Muslims and their neighbors[7]. Active citizens generally speak both (elite Hindi) or 'associate' official English and at least one local language. India has the paradoxical good fortune to claim English as a mere convenience, to follow Nehru's modernizing line of statesmanship, rather than a particular native language that would favor some citizens and inconvenience others[8]. English never got under India's skin (Dasgupta, 1993: 99)[9]. It developed alongside local codes, and provides a vehicle for sidestepping conflicts among them (like a secular state runs alongside contending religions). Had India been a bit more flexible and tolerant at Independence, had it included Urdu among the many official languages, Pakistan might not have broken away. Frustrated language rights have a way of congealing into less negotiable, sometimes intolerable, religious differences (Brass, 1974)[10]. Think also of the 'ramshackle' multiethnic Ottoman Empire, where 'ethno-religious groups remained culturally autonomous' under a hole-ly government. It was 'far from a perfect political system, but it worked', unlike the disastrously streamlined replacement that the British imposed[11]. Perhaps the United States can take some advantage of linguistic loose ends to put democratic coordinating procedure to hard work, now that non-English speakers are coming to this country in unprecedented numbers. It will not be the first American country to wrest an advantage out of troublesome diversity.

Peru has been learning the lesson after centuries of official monolingualism that effectively excluded the indigenous masses. As late as 1990, Mario Vargas Llosa ran for president on a platform that considered Indians to be only potential Peruvians,

[6] 'India's widespread poverty combined with its acute multicultural divisions would appear to be fertile grounds for the rampant growth of antidemocratic movements … Why has this not happened? First, every Indian is a member of a cultural minority so tiny that its members cannot possibly govern India alone. The sheer number of cultural fragments into which India is divided means that each is small, not only far short of a majority but far too small to rule over that vast and varied subcontinent. No Indian minority could rule without employing overwhelming coercion by military and police forces. But the military and police are not available for that purpose' (Dahl, 1999: 162).

[7] 'The more time you spend in India the more you realize that this teeming, multiethnic, multireligious, multilingual country is one of the world's great wonders—a miracle with message. And the message is that democracy matters … for all these reasons that the US is so wrong not to press for democratization in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Is it an accident that India has the largest Muslim minority in the world, with plenty of economic grievances, yet not a single Indian Muslim was found in Al Qaeda?' (Friedman, 1999).

[8] Nehru found English necessary for 'co-opting the South to participate in the new national project', since Tamil speakers resented the hegemony of Hindustani (Sonntag, 2000: 137). 'The right's agenda of propagating a Hindu imagining of the nation contains an elitist component; hence the right sometimes finds itself defending the elite language of English, sometimes promoting a chaste Hindi over English' (137).

[9] Of course Gandhi resented English and in his wake, Rammanohar Lohia went so far as to ally with the elite defenders of Sanskritized Hindi against using English. See Sonntag (2000: 138).

[10] I am grateful to Amrita Basu for the reference to Brass. She commented that today the conflicts around Kashmir could be negotiated as territorial, but when religion is the issue, difference becomes intractable.

[11] 'During World War I Britain and its allies destroyed the old order without considering the long-term consequences … But most of the new states were weak and unstable, the rulers lacked legitimacy, and the frontiers were arbitrary, illogical, and unjust, giving rise to powerful irredentist tendencies' (Shlaim, 1995: 5, 16–17).

once they left their traditions for modern ways. But today, the country is trying to recast its self-image as incomparably diverse, with its citizens as beneficiaries of both indigenous and immigrant cultures. After the presidency of Alberto Fujimori, known as 'el chino' though his roots and possible political future are in Japan[12], and the election of President Toledo who campaigned in Quechua (through his foreign wife) as well as in Spanish, Peru experiments with a bi-cultural program of education that assumes all citizens should know Spanish plus at least one (of forty) indigenous languages[13]. The assumption is a bit romantic, though, as if being Peruvian imposes nativist cultural demands. In practice, Spanish speakers don't bother to learn even Quechua, let alone minor languages. Peruvians are diverse and many resent Mrs. Elianne Karp Toledo's efforts to Andeanize Peru. Can we imagine a practical adjustment that promotes respect, enhances education for all, and gets unstuck from damaging implosions of nation and state? What if Quechua counted as a legitimate language that, like English or French, conferred bilingual benefits alongside Spanish as the *lingua franca*? Bilingual migrants might be ahead of monolingual Creoles and serve, without essentializing their Peruvianness, as models for the country.

The US too can take the hint about the broad bases of allegiance supported by migrants' double moorings that make the either/or choice of cultural identity obsolete. Many a newcomer still feels pressed to lose a home language to the host, although relief from linguistic irritation weakens the ground for democracy.

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[12] 'What does a former president do after he has led his country for 10 years, crushed two guerrilla insurgencies, gone into exile and dodged an international warrant for his arrest? If you are Alberto K. Fujimori of Peru, you repackage yourself as an expert on terrorism with an eye toward a political comeback. Mr. Fujimori has reportedly consulted leaders of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party about running for a seat in Japan's Parliament' (Brooke, 2002: 1).

[13] During the late 1990s, Professor Juan Carlos Godenzzi was able to establish a new bilingual educational program in Peru on a national scale by the creation of a *Dirección Nacional* within the Secretary of Education in Peru. Also see: Zavala (2002).

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