

Building a New Public Idea about Language

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# *Building a New Public Idea about Language*

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MARY LOUISE PRATT

It was a fancy California wedding party at a big Bay Area hotel. The groom's family spoke Urdu, and the bride's spoke Gujarati and Urdu. Both were practicing Muslims, but she was from southern California, sometimes regarded by northerners as too laid-back. The groom was attended by his two best friends from high school, one of Mexican-Jewish-Anglo parentage and the other of Chinese and Japanese descent via Hawai'i and Sacramento. The groom's younger sister was master of ceremonies. During a long program of toasts and tributes, English was the lingua franca, with a few departures for jokes or tears (it was the fathers who wept). Two poets performed. One, an elder known for his verbal skill and love of literature, recited a long celebratory poem in Urdu that deeply moved many of the adults. The other was a friend of the newlyweds, a young man of Syrian and Anglo-American parents. He performed in English a long lively poem, also composed for the occasion and rooted in contemporary hip-hop. The Mexican-Jewish-Anglo best man brought down the house with a bilingual Urdu-English joke a youngster had told him. I marveled yet again at the gorgeous, strenuous creativity of our transculturated young. At the same time I mourned the fact that the younger poet, a lover of literature who taught English at a community college, would probably never have a chance to study the elder's poetic tradition or that of his own Syrian parent.

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What's wrong with this linguistic picture? More than meets the eye. Even the Urdu-speaking young at the wedding did not understand the formal language of the elder's poem. Yet Urdu, as the groom's generation loses it, turns up on the government's list of critical languages of which educated bilingual speakers are urgently needed. Urdu was the groom's first language, but he had never had the chance to learn to read or write it or develop adult competence in speaking. Like most observant Muslims, he longed to learn Arabic to read the Koran in the original. Months later he quit his job to take an intensive summer course. Opportunities for summers in Latin America and family connections in Mexico had enabled the first best man to achieve an impressive fluency in Spanish. But just as he entered the federal Teach for America program, California's Proposition 227 forbade him to use it in his predominantly Spanish-speaking California classroom. The second best man, determined to explore his roots, had just returned from three years of teaching English in China, where he had gradually managed to acquire enough Mandarin to get around. All three young men's lives had produced strong incentives for them to learn and use other languages. But they were almost entirely on their own. Not even the affluent California suburb where they grew up, with family resources, safe streets, and good schools, had offered them opportunities or encouragement to develop their abilities in languages other than English. And these are the privileged among us.

Such stories are familiar to language professionals in contemporary North America. They're what give the United States its well-earned nickname of *cementerio de lenguas*, a language cemetery. Yet accelerated migration and the shock of 9/11 have opened to question the hundred-year American love affair with monolingualism. We're even joking about it now: "What do you call a person who knows three languages? Trilingual. What do you call a person who knows two languages? Bilingual. What do you call a person who knows only one language? An American." Transformed internally since 1980 by the largest immigration in its history, the country is rediscovering the pleasures and pains of living multilingually; Spanish is becoming a de facto second language; people are learning to work in contact with multiple languages in every aspect of daily life. Externally September 11 revealed a country linguistically unequipped to apprehend its geopolitical situation, incapable of preventing or anticipating crises and of responding adequately when they came. The lived reality of multilingualism and the imperatives of global relations both fly in the face of monolingualist language policies, while those policies inflict needless social and psychic violence on vulnerable populations.

So far, the most tangible sign of change has been an understandable rush to fund new security-related language programs and centers, sometimes at

the expense of established programs. But perhaps today's dramatic circumstances offer a broader opening for a new public idea about language, language learning, multilingualism, and citizenship. If scholars and teachers of language are able to seize this opening, they will make themselves heard as advocates not for particular languages but for the importance of knowing languages and of knowing the world through languages. Speaking as people who have had the opportunity to learn languages well, who made the effort and reap the rewards, scholars of non-English languages and cultures are uniquely situated to bear witness to the possibilities of language learning and to make the case for language learning as an aspect of educated citizenship. I believe we need to make that case in as many ways as possible, right now. Language education is far too big an issue to be contained by national security concerns alone. If a new public idea is vigorously asserted, it can generate resources that will help make its promise a reality.

What might a new public idea about language look like? Reflecting on this question, I've come up with four misconceptions to expose and four concepts to propose.

## MISCONCEPTIONS

*Misconception 1: Immigrants and their children do not want to retain their languages of origin.* As a general claim, this is false (see Krashen, esp. ch. 5). Immigrant families are often willing to give up their languages of origin if they feel that retaining the language will harm their children's chances for success, or keep them from fitting in, or if they are told, as they often are, that bilingualism is a handicap. But the loss is usually experienced as serious and painful by both old and young. The interruption in generational relationships especially between grandparents and grandchildren is one of the greatest costs, socially and psychically. Often when they reach their late teens, young people seek to reconnect with their first language and its culture. Parents who do try to develop their languages of origin in their children often find this difficult to do in the absence of social support for their efforts.

The opposite and equally false argument is also made at times, that immigrants and their children do not want to learn English and must be compelled to do so. This widespread belief is disproved by every survey done on the subject. Families whose first language is not English consistently report that, given a real choice, their preference for their children would be bilingualism.<sup>1</sup> The problem immigrants complain of most often is the lack of opportunities to learn English. This is the single biggest obstacle many immigrants face.

*Misconception 2: Americans are hostile to multilingualism.* Antagonism to multilingualism is not new in the United States. In the 1930s child-rearing

manuals were telling parents that bilingualism was harmful to their children's psychological development. Nevertheless, I think what exists overall in the United States is ambivalence rather than simple hostility. This ambivalence was brought home to me recently by an airport van driver who picked me up in California. As I snapped on my seat belt, he asked where I was going. "Japan," I said. He blurted a lengthy greeting in Japanese. "How do you know that?" I asked, surprised to hear the language flow out of a middle-aged Anglo-American. He told me he tried to learn phrases in as many languages as he could. He loved languages, loved the linguistic diversity of California. Nothing delighted him more, he said, than walking the streets of San Francisco and hearing the Tower of Babel. I asked him where he lived. "Redwood City," he told me. "My wife is from Mexico." "Oh, have your kids learned Spanish?" I asked. "Well, she speaks it to them at home." "And what about you?" I said. "No," he replied. "To tell you the truth, I am one of the ones who thinks they have to learn English." "Oh," I said, stunned. "But didn't you ever want to be able to communicate with your in-laws?" A long silence followed. I don't know what was going through the driver's mind, but I recalled a conversation I had overheard in a gas station in western Mexico. Two middle-aged men were sitting on a bench, and one was weeping. His son, who had immigrated to the United States to work, had brought home his new wife, a young woman from Minnesota with whom he seemed very happy but who spoke only English. The father's anguished question was, "¿Y cómo nos vamos a querer si no podemos conversar?" ("How are we going to love each other if we can't talk?"). Language was breaking the web of continuity that gave meaning to his life.

I suspect the taxi driver's ambivalence about multilingualism is shared by many Americans. The problem is that only one side of the ambivalence, the English-only side, has been mobilized and exploited politically. It's time to mobilize the other side. One way I attempt to do this in public settings is to poll my audiences for their linguistic history. How many people here, I ask, grew up speaking a language other than English? How many are married to someone who did? How many people had a parent who spoke a language other than English? a grandparent? By the time you get to grandparents, usually a significant proportion of the audience has a hand in the air.<sup>2</sup> Then you can begin to reflect on this history and on the differences between immigration today, where contact with the home country remains intense, and immigration before 1940, when immigration was seen as a permanent break. In the 2000 census, preliminary figures show that between forty-five and fifty million people indicated they spoke a language other than English at home ("Age").

*Misconception 3: Second-language learning has to start in early childhood, or we might as well throw up our hands.* This idea often appears as an excuse

for throwing up our hands or more likely for explaining why they were up in the air to begin with. After several conversations in Washington I am convinced that this myth is the single most potent factor preventing a serious public investment in language education. Yet the reality of language learning is so much more complex. Adults are better at aspects of it because they know their native language well, can recognize cognates, are literate and skilled at pattern recognition, and can do intensive work. Other things, like sound imitation, often come easier to the young. But the idea that language learning is easy for the young is also misleading. It takes enormous resources to develop children's competence in their native language, and children have to work hard at it. The same is true of second languages.

No group has more standing than the scholarly community to belie the "primary school or never" myth; we are its living, breathing counterexamples. In North America most native English speakers who become scholars of non-English languages and cultures began to study those languages in their teens or twenties. Many of us learn new languages to do research. We are evidence that while it may never be too early to start language learning, it is also never too late. "Never too early, never too late" needs to be a prominent theme in the new public idea about language. It is true that our failure to teach languages at an early age is detrimental to society as a whole; it is also true that motivated and capable language learners can turn up at any point in the education system, and when they do, there should be opportunities and incentives for them to learn.

*Misconception 4: The primary public need for language expertise is national security* (see, e.g., Baron; Simon). The stakes go far beyond security, as the national security agencies readily agree.<sup>3</sup> Within its own borders the United States needs professionals and service people of all kinds who can operate in locally spoken languages. A few months ago, for example, two southern California primary school teachers told me of their frustration when a flagship Japanese program was set up in their school district, while an acute need for Tagalog-speaking nurses, doctors, lawyers, teachers, social workers, even tax preparers went unmet. There was no pipeline to track local Tagalog speakers into these professions and enable them to develop their Tagalog. The city of Oakland recently declared Spanish and Chinese second official languages in which all public services would be made available (Pementel and Burress). What educational pipelines are producing the bilingual personnel to make good on that commitment?

In its external relations North America needs scholars, area experts, diplomats, negotiators, businesspeople, and public servants with the ability to communicate at an advanced level in the languages and cultures of the populations with whom they work. These are the people who, on many

fronts, maintain ongoing relationships of all kinds across the world, whether or not the languages they speak are considered “critical” at the moment. Their work prevents “critical” situations from arising and provides deep, long-term knowledge when they do. By the time a language has become a national security imperative, in a way it’s already too late: the other has already been defined as an enemy; the failures of communication and understanding have already done their damage. And if there are no experts who know the language, it’s too late to create them now. The groom at the wedding hated the thought of people studying Urdu for counterterrorism. Language learning based on fear, he thought, was worse than none at all. Some of my colleagues were encouraged by a TV ad that appeared during a World Series depicting the familiar patriarch roaring, “Uncle Sam wants you to learn a foreign language.” I cringed at the narrow association of language learning with military conscription.

It is critical that there be multiple pipelines to advanced language competence and critical that linguistic others not be defined from the start as potential enemies. A new public idea about language has to make a different case. Developed communicative relationships help prevent national security issues from arising.

## CONCEPTS TO PROPOSE

*Proposal 1: Monolingualism should be shown to be a handicap.* The cognitive benefits of second-language learning are well known, and every child should have access to them. Children with a strong knowledge of two languages (any two) score higher in every kind of cognitive testing than monolingual children (see Cooper; Olsen and Brown). Ah, we hear, but the rest of the world now speaks English. The emergence of English as a global lingua franca does not mean the world is increasingly English-speaking, as English-speaking is usually understood by Americans. It means more and more people are acquiring competence in English for use in contexts of work or study. Being monolingual in English remains a sure recipe for crippling one’s ability to interact with speakers of other languages in all but the most limited and scripted ways.

*Proposal 2: Local heritage communities must be engaged.* Probably nothing has greater potential for revitalizing and revalorizing the study of languages than the multilingualism that exists among us at this moment. It is a massive resource that we foolishly resist capitalizing on. Today students entering the school system who speak languages other than English are identified by the Department of Education as LEPs, meaning those of limited English proficiency even when they may speak English perfectly well. Let

us define LEPs instead as linguistically endowed persons, whose knowledge of other languages is a resource for themselves and others. It makes sense to capitalize on our multilingual primary schools and playgrounds, where they exist, to give all children the experience of learning and using more than one language.

These communities should also be sources of scholars, diplomats, international professionals of all kinds. Why shouldn't Sacramento, with some 75,000 Russian speakers, be the crucible of the next generation of Slavists? Why shouldn't the 100,000 Vietnamese speakers in Texas make that state the place for a bilingual research nucleus in Vietnamese studies? Why shouldn't Dearborn, Michigan, with some 50,000 native speakers of Arabic, be a crucible for a new pool of Middle East scholars and diplomats?<sup>4</sup> In higher education, involvement with local language communities is a good way to develop a public commitment to language education.

*Proposal 3: Advanced competence is a key educational goal.* No one is better prepared to identify this goal than scholars who have gone through the long, focused training required to achieve a broad and deep oral or literate knowledge of multiple languages. There are many kinds and degrees of language competence, and all have benefits. Knowing a language well enough to get by in the day to day is very different from knowing a language well enough to read sophisticated texts, write, develop adult relationships, exercise one's profession, move effectively in a range of contexts, and adapt quickly to new situations. Though everyone knows these differences exist, the current public idea of language has no way of talking about them, just as it has no way of talking about the many kinds of language learning. Advanced competence requires a large investment of time and money for intensive work and study abroad. This is as true for heritage speakers as it is for nonnatives. The idea that language learning just comes naturally obscures the roles long-term training and experience abroad play in the development of advanced language abilities, whether in first languages or added ones.<sup>5</sup>

One of the criteria that define advanced competence is the ability to use a language effectively in complex settings beyond the construction of grammatical utterances. Questions are a good example, not least because they lie at the heart of the geopolitics of language interaction. Knowing how to construct a grammatical interrogative in a language is a far cry indeed from knowing how to elicit information effectively in that language. A political scientist once told me of an asylum hearing where a judge was asking arriving refugees whether they were afraid to return to El Salvador. To the judge's surprise the reply was usually no, even when it was known that returning meant certain death. The judge, it turned out, was asking the wrong question. For the asylum seekers, to acknowledge fear was to

display cowardice and increase one's vulnerability. When the judge began asking instead, "What will happen to you if you return?," the critical information could emerge.

Advanced competence involves the ability to conduct mature human relationships in the language. Whether these relationships are social, professional, or strategic, they involve knowledge far beyond the grammatical. Such knowledge can be acquired at any stage of life, but it takes time, work, and instruction. Identifying advanced competence as a specific educational goal helps explain why language—including one's native language—has to be taught with as much effort and seriousness as mathematics or music. The burgeoning demand for applied linguists suggests a recognition of this fact. The public idea of language needs to catch up.

*Proposal 4: We need language pipelines.* Our communities and educational systems need to develop pipelines that identify gifted and motivated language learners, offer them opportunities to develop their abilities, and track them into programs of study that will make use of their languages. With relatively little new infrastructure, American high schools can become the beginning of a pipeline to advanced language study linked to cultural, scholarly, and professional expertise. Scholarships are the key, and intensive instruction and experience abroad are the means. What if secondary school teachers could nominate their strong language students for enrichment programs like summer intensive courses, study abroad, work in additional languages? Colleges and universities could provide those programs. They could also identify language achievements as high-status criteria for admission and scholarships. Such opportunities would give families an incentive to encourage their young to learn new languages or retain and develop the ones they have. In colleges and universities gifted, motivated language students would continue to be identified and encouraged to develop advanced capabilities or to add new languages. They would be directed toward majors, courses, honors projects that involve their linguistic abilities. Advanced training would continue in the form of tutorials, intensive courses, study and research opportunities abroad, consortial arrangements among institutions. Career paths requiring language skills would be identified. Undergraduate programs could be pipelines to a set of scholarship-funded two-year MA programs in key language and area specialties. These MA programs would combine advanced language study, including intensive work and study abroad, with graduate study in a discipline or on a career path, be it literary or cultural study, medicine, education, international relations, history, anthropology, sociology, political science, life sciences, linguistics, or area studies. At the postgraduate and professional levels, the language pipeline could fund scholars to acquire

new language expertise needed for their work—American studies professors, for instance, who want to branch into hemispheric studies and need to learn other languages of the Americas to do so; or international relations scholars who need to read Korean; or Hispanists who want to learn Catalan, Quechua, or Arabic. Language acquisition could be rewarded in the granting of promotions and raises.

Let me sum up the eight points I've made, converting the negative ones into positive statements:

1. All things being equal, bilingual families usually prefer to stay bilingual. Immigrant families do not simply want to lose their home languages, and they do want to learn English.
2. Americans are not hostile to multilingualism; they are ambivalent, both proud of their multilingual history and committed to English as the *lingua franca*. We need a public idea that mobilizes that pride.
3. It's never too early and never too late to learn a language. Second-language learning does not have to begin in early childhood.
4. National security concerns define our language needs too narrowly. We need knowledge and interaction of all kinds, and these will make national security crises less likely to arise.
5. Monolingualism is a handicap. No child should be left behind.
6. Local heritage communities must be engaged by our language programs.
7. Advanced competence is a key educational goal.
8. We need linguistic pipelines at every level.

To whom might we take these ideas? How does one go about creating a new public idea? As our professional gatherings affirm time and again, we are full of ideas. One of the most valuable steps is to translate them into grant applications and new relationships in communities and states. Overall the best thing scholars can do now is work as LEPs (linguistically endowed persons) to assert themselves in educational institutions, in the media, in community organizations, and in state and federal educational bureaucracies, advocating a new public idea, accompanying that idea where possible with concrete suggestions. At stake is not any particular language but the value of advanced language learning itself. No one is better prepared than the scholarly community to make this case.

## NOTES

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eign Languages and Literatures for helpful suggestions; and to participants in the 2002 ADFL seminar in Long Beach for ideas and stimulating discussion.

<sup>1</sup>Guadalupe Valdés has shown that surveys about bilingualism are often designed from a monolingual perspective that is unable to capture the reality of language use and attitudes in bilingual populations. See, for example, “Still Looking for América” (Valdés et al.) and Valdés’s *Expanding Definitions of Giftedness*.

<sup>2</sup>If hands are not raised and you find yourself with a long-term monolingual population, you can tell your audience they are an interesting exception—and ask them what historical factors have defined the community this way.

<sup>3</sup>Both Johanna Nichols and Guadalupe Valdés (“Foreign Language Teaching”) articulated this position eloquently in 1988, in response to government proposals to found the National Language Center.

<sup>4</sup>For recent discussion of this subject, see Peyton, Ranard, and McGinnis.

<sup>5</sup>Whether language training is institutionalized or not, all societies have it. They train their orators, scribes, judges, singers, teachers, holy people, curers, and storytellers; they have ways to identify those who have talent for these things.

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