

Gustavo Pérez Firmat

*on bilingualism &
its discontents*

In a letter written toward the end of his life, the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev remarked that a writer who did not write only in his mother tongue was a thief and a pig. Although Turgenev did not explain the epithets, it's not difficult to figure out what he meant. Since a language is a form of cultural property, a writer who uses words that do not belong to him is a thief; since his theft of the words of others entails the neglect of his own, he is a pig. As it happens, Turgenev wrote his letter in German,

Gustavo Pérez Firmat, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2004, is David Feinson Professor of Humanities at Columbia University, where he teaches Spanish, Spanish American, and Latino literature. His books of literary and cultural criticism include "Literature and Liminality" (1986), "The Cuban Condition" (1989), and "Life on the Hyphen" (1994). He is also the author of a memoir, "Next Year in Cuba" (1995), and of several collections of poetry in English and Spanish, including "Carolina Cuban" (1987) and "Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio" (2000).

© 2005 by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

his third language. And even though his letters are often every bit as literary as his novels, apparently for him the use of other languages in correspondence did not count as an infraction against his mother tongue. Indeed, it is revealing that Turgenev, in spite of his mastery of several European languages and his many years of residence outside Russia, never seized the opportunity, or succumbed to the temptation, of writing fiction in a language other than Russian. Once, when a reviewer incorrectly stated that one of his novellas had been written originally in French, an offended Turgenev pointed out – in flawless French – that he would never stoop to something so base.

Turgenev's attitude toward the Russian language offers an instance of the phenomenon that Uriel Weinreich termed language loyalty – that powerful, deep-seated attachment that many of us feel toward our mother tongue. Although feelings of language loyalty go back to the ancient Greeks, who stigmatized users of other languages as 'barbarians,' it is only more recently that individual languages have acquired the pull and prestige that they now enjoy. Unlike Turgenev, a sixteenth-century neo-Latin poet felt few qualms about not using his mother tongue for literary composition. Even writers who worked primarily in the vernacular also wrote, without apparent damage to their self-esteem, in other languages: Milton composed Italian sonnets; Garcilaso de la Vega wrote Latin odes. It was not until the rise of modern nation-states that native languages became national languages, and thus a privileged cultural possession. For most of us, as for Turgenev, the language that we speak is a fundamental component of our nationality, and hence of our sense of who we are. That is why when we want to question someone's claims

about his nationality, we often take aim at his language habits: “Oye, chico, pero tú no suenas cubano.” Or, “Funny, you don’t sound like an American.” As Andrée Tabouret-Keller puts it, language acts are acts of identity. Who we are is what we speak.

As for myself, I have always felt a mixture of regret and remorse that I have not done more of my writing, and my living, in Spanish. Sometimes I have even thought that every single one of my English sentences, including this one, hides the absence of the Spanish sentence that I wasn’t willing or able to write. And that if I handle English more or less well, it is because I want to write such clear, clean prose that no one will miss the Spanish that it replaces (and that it can never replace). Why I haven’t tried to write more in Spanish is something that I’ve wondered about, something that I’m wondering about right now, but that I don’t entirely understand. I know all about the practical reasons for my use of English, but I also suspect that there are other, more murky motives of which I’m only half aware: anger, fear of failure, maybe even a little self-hatred. If you say “tomato” and I say *tu madre*, the code-switching expletive may be a symptom of the speaker’s unhappiness with his mother tongue, with his other tongue, and most of all, perhaps, with himself. And if you say “Latino” and I say *la tuya*, this expletive may reflect his unwillingness to accept his switch in loyalties.

It’s been said that our mother tongue is the only one in which we have a right to make mistakes. But for many of us whose mother tongue is Spanish but who spend our lives on the hyphen, exactly the opposite is true: Spanish is the only tongue in which we *cannot* make mistakes. And not necessarily because we have mastered English better than

Spanish – I haven’t mastered either one; both have mastered me – but because our deficiencies in English do not undermine our sense of self. For most of my adult life, the language I have felt uneasy about has been Spanish, my mother tongue, rather than English, my second language. When I’m speaking English, my Cuban accent doesn’t faze me, and I don’t feel guilty about my occasional lapses. But if I’m speaking Spanish and I hear myself fumbling for words, I cringe. Every time I commit an inadvertent Anglicism, every time I say *consistente* instead of *consecuente*, or *aplicación* instead of *solicitud*, I want to run and hide.

Since a crucial component of our self-image is the idea we have of ourselves as language users, one of the most disabling forms of self-doubt arises from the conviction that we cannot speak our native language well enough. In my Spanish classes, I have witnessed this fear many times in students of Hispanic background. I have seen how they squirm and look away when I call on them, when they think I think they should speak like natives. I have often squirmed and looked away myself, feeling that no matter how good my Spanish may be, it is just not good enough, not what it should be for somebody born and raised in Cuba.

The complexity of these feelings suggests that the notion of language loyalty, useful as it is in some contexts, doesn’t do justice to an individual’s attachment to his or her languages. It is not enough to explain, as Uriel Weinreich does, that language loyalty is nationalism applied to language. For one thing, tongue ties don’t always correspond to national borders. For another, tongue ties antedate national allegiances. Psychologists have found that already in the first weeks of life infants can distinguish the sounds of their mother tongue, even when they are

not uttered by their mothers. That is to say, even before we can recognize those pockets of sound that we call words, we are bound to one language by ties too primal, too irreflective, to be subsumed under the notion of loyalty.

Languages not only inspire loyalty; they also provoke fear, resentment, rage, jealousy, love, euphoria – the entire gamut of human emotion. From the undergraduate whose difficulties with the subjunctive make him complain that he “hates Spanish,” to the exile who clasps her mother tongue in a tight embrace, tongue ties are every bit as knotty as our other affections. And not only because of the role of language in shaping our conscious identity, but also because languages serve to act out and work through conflicts whose origins lie elsewhere, in groups and individuals who not only speak a given language, but – what is much more important – for whom that language speaks. The Spanish poet Pedro Salinas, in a letter to Katherine Whitmore, the American muse of *La voz a ti debida*, perhaps the greatest volume of love poetry ever written in the Spanish language, writes, in English: “If I like English, if I read English, it is only by its similarity with you. I read English as I would look at a picture of you.” Falling in love with an American is falling in love with the English language. Having it out with *un español* is having it out with *el español*.

Entrenched as it is in all the European languages, the idea of a ‘mother’ tongue simplifies a much more complicated situation. Mother tongues are forked or folded into father and sister tongues, spouse and lover tongues, friend and enemy tongues. Among bilinguals and multilinguals, language kinship is not restricted to the maternal. The philosopher George Santayana, who was born and raised in Spain, identified Spanish –

his ‘mother’ tongue – with his father, and English – the language in which he wrote all his work – with his half sister Susana, who was his first English teacher. Unlike Santayana, the Cuban writer Calvert Casey, who was born in Baltimore of a Cuban mother and an American father, wrote in both Spanish and English, but assigned them to incompatible emotional registers. In Casey’s stories his mother’s Spanish serves as the language of disguise, of dissimulation – indeed, his most famous story is called “Notas de un simulador.” But English, Casey’s father’s tongue, was an instrument for self-revelation, the only medium in which he could express his desire for the male body, which he ultimately identified with his father’s body.

My point is that many nonlinguistic factors, some nearly impossible to detect, determine a bilingual’s engagement with languages. In the course of their lives, bilinguals shape – and are shaped by – their own language family, which does not quite fit the model of the Freudian family romance. In the Freudian scenario, the child is caught between the male and female parent; in the linguistic family romance, the bilingual subject oscillates – sometimes gleefully, sometimes gloomily – between languages that are not always distinguished so neatly. Although the other tongue may indeed be the father’s, there will be times when both tongues will be regarded as motherly. In these instances, the competition involves aspirants to the maternal slot, as if the child, rather than having to negotiate between parents of opposite sexes, had to choose between a parent and a stepparent, or decide which of his mothers is the legitimate one.

Because we tend to think about bilingualism in terms of the dichotomy ‘mother-other,’ we sometimes overlook that the ‘other,’ like the mother, has a

gender: there are he-tongues as well as she-tongues. The person I am closest to is an American woman; the person who had the biggest impact on my life, and to whom I was never close, was a Cuban man. The language of my inner discourse, the taunts and endearments I whisper only to myself, is shaped by these and other emotional entanglements. While I talk to myself both in Spanish and English, when I hear Spanish voices in my head, they are usually male; when I hear English voices, they are usually female. Like these voices, my languages are gendered – not intrinsically but circumstantially. For me English is a loving and accessible she-tongue; Spanish, a distant but beloved he-tongue. The true bilingual is not someone who possesses ‘native competence’ in two languages, but someone who is equally attracted to, or torn between, competing tongues.

Contrary to some reports, there is no bilingualism without pain. Although bilinguals are often playful, bilingualism is not a game. More often than not, the interlingual puns of bilingual writers are ill-tempered, nasty, aggressive: have pun, will travel. Etymologically, puns are *pullas*, jabs; when we go for the jocular, we go for the jugular – even if it is our own. The bilingual muse is a melancholy muse; it divides and does not conquer.

I should make clear that I am not talking about casual or classroom bilingualism, about the tourist, the scholar, or the student, but about those of us who live shaping events in our lives – growing up, falling in love, surviving illness, enduring loss – in more than one language. In these circumstances, the celebration of bilingualism is not the dominant mode. For every moment of bilingual bliss, there is a corresponding moment of bilingual blues. For every merry bilingual who feasts on wordplay – all roads lead

to roam – there is a somber bilingual who bites his tongues, someone for whom, as Santayana once remarked, language belongs to the dark side of life.

It may be heretical for a Spanish professor to say this, but I think we are sometimes too quick in singing the praises of bilingualism. Steven Kellman, the author of a book entitled *The Translingual Imagination*, writes: “If identity is shaped by language, then monolingualism is a deficiency disorder.” Yes and no. Yes, identity is shaped by language; but no, languages are not like vitamins. The blurb on the jacket of Kellman’s book sounds a similar note: “Monolingualism is a form of oppression. Join the future, read this book.” I don’t deny the damage done by coercive monolingualism, which sometimes results in the extirpation of a mother tongue, but bilingualism can engender its own forms of oppression. Calques and barbarisms are only the surface tremors of rifts that reach deeper than syntax or vocabulary. Among bilinguals, nostalgia for monolingualism is at least as common as its repudiation. A Czech proverb teaches: “Learn a new language, get a new soul.” Is it always a blessing to be multisouled?