

Invitation

Come play bilingual games with me. Maybe you already play them, either actively or just by listening for surprises as one language interrupts another. In that case, the invitation is to think together about why the games are good for you and good for the country. For both veteran and rookie players, time out can go toward reflection about what we win. If you haven't yet been wondering about the ways that bilingualism can improve a range of private and public moves—in aesthetics, politics, and philosophy (not to mention business and commerce)—let's take some time out together. What if I said that an extra language, beyond a coordinating lingua franca, promotes personal development, fair procedure, and effective education, while one-way assimilation derails progress on all counts? Would you be curious about the arguments and perhaps willing to change your mind if bilingualism had seemed irrelevant or even damaging? I hope you are willing, and I offer this book as an invitation to consider the cultural conditions for fair and fulfilling contemporary life.

This book is about added value, not about remediation. More than one language is a supplement, not a deficiency. It is a dangerous supplement to monolingualism, whether the addi-

tion amounts to two languages or to many. Bilingualism overloads mono systems, and multilingualism does it more. But in principle bi- and multilingualism make similar mischief with meaning. The underlying goal of thinking about these overloads as intellectual, artistic, and ethical enhancements will be to open public debates beyond the failing standard of monolingual assimilation. Throughout the following chapters I address the enhancements in the most theoretically sophisticated terms I can muster, but in plain language. Partly the gambit is to demonstrate that theory is practically second nature to bilinguals, who normally abstract expression from meaning, and partly the range of refinements that follow from the “open sesame” of bilingual readings means to persuade some readers that bilingualism is intellectually advantageous. Others will know that already.

Whether or not you have much of a second language yet, the opportunities to play bilingual games are hard to miss. Now that mass migrations take home languages to host settings, the sound of alternative languages interrupts the single standard that modern states had demanded and thereby refreshes regional variants that modernity had banished.¹ Even embarrassing mistakes shouldn’t stop you. Most of us make them and they’re part of bilingual fun. Mistakes can brighten speech with a rise of laughter (a *sun-risa*)² or give the pleasure of a found poem. Always, they mark communication with a cut or a tear that comes close to producing an aesthetic effect. The risk and thrill of speaking or writing anything can sting, every time language fails us. But don’t imagine that other more dignified language games are more important. Because knowing how language can fail makes success feel like a small miracle.

Bilingualism, you can already tell, is serious fun, because democracy depends on constructing those miraculous and precarious points of contact from mismatches among codes and

peoples. If there were no mismatches, if contact were easy, democracy might cramp from lack of exercise. The exercise needs an almost tragicomic taste for the interrupted communication that requires humility and that begs debate and negotiation. Part of bilingual gamesmanship is to train a predisposition toward feeling funny, or on edge, about language, the way that artists, activists, and philosophers are on edge about familiar or conventional uses.

Can we count on good trainers of an edgy sense of play? No. Not yet, or not enough. My invitation to play bilingual games holds out a hope that you might also consider coaching a taste for edginess. It is modest work, compared to the challenges of world peace, or economic justice, or national security. But today these serious goals require enabling yet unfamiliar predispositions toward doubt and irritation. One incentive to do the training is simply that the work is available to many of us, unlike other interventions that require, say, technical training or economic power. The coaching work might attract administrators, managers, civil servants, lawyers, counselors. But it practically beckons to teachers of literary arts and other performance media whose jobs include fine-tuning the senses to appreciate the small miracles of human creativity.

The kind of aesthetic education of hearts and minds that will promote democracy develops through free play, even some embarrassing antics. Abraham Lincoln, for one, wasn't worried about playing the fool once in a while. Instead he worried about people who refused to lighten up.³ Lincoln knew that jokes interrupt single-minded zeal and intolerance. Expanding our sense of humor can make us better citizens. Seriously, folks. When imperfectly learned languages play jokes with you by unhinging meaning from intention, don't writhe with embarrassment. Most of the time, you're not even the butt of the joke but only a participant observer who can join the laugh-

ter if you choose to. In language games, as in other contact sports, a good sport means one who loses gracefully. Losing also helps to learn the (philosophical, political, aesthetic) lesson: language, including your own, plays hit-and-miss games with the world. This lesson was the centerpiece of the modern university designed by Wilhelm von Humboldt, because “in the study of foreign tongues students best learned the humility that comes from never forgetting . . . to negotiate the otherness of the world.”⁴

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Learning to anticipate the interruptions and the mistakes that make you feel funny leads to wariness about what you say, and what you hear. And wariness is a reminder that linguistic constructions, including politics, are precarious arrangements in need of periodic adjustment. Thoughtful people also know this in one language, but living in more than one refreshes that sense of caution and responsibility with each missed communication. When freshness is the goal of the game, it’s hard to know who are the more privileged players. The poor can play as well as the rich, because bilingual games often level the ground with moves of inclusion and exclusion that don’t depend on power. Educated monolinguals may maneuver among more linguistic registers than unschooled counterparts, but even illiterate bilinguals can slip from one language to another to circumvent power and win points. So bilingualism is good for a democratic country, for reasons beyond the obvious economic and security advantages. No kidding.

Think about the challenges to democratic society in times of globalization. Both industrial and developing nations are adjusting to the internal pressures of mass migrations and to the external constraints of international agencies and networks (everything from courts and banks to terrorist grids). The most obvious challenges are probably to balance political processes between national cohesion and personal rights, and to educate

people in ways that make the most of personal opportunities without making a mess of social conditions. Maybe you already intuit the benefits of your existing or potential bilingualism and can use the book to back up the position. If, on the other hand, you're not curious enough to hear and to heed arguments, the inertia may itself be a symptom of the debilitating mono system of language and culture. We inherited that single-minded system from an early and outmoded project for national consolidation.

In today's readjustments to global dynamics, mono is a malady of adolescent societies. The world has outgrown a one-to-one identity between a language and a people. Individual people have also added one identity to another in ways that strain against the very concept of identity. Growing pains can't be avoided in the process of maturing toward tolerance for complicated times. How can we avoid pain, while people and languages rub and irritate one another? But surely there are ways to mitigate the danger of irritation and even derive pleasure from the rub. One way is to recognize multiplicity as a medicine for the monolithic condition, instead of dismissing multilingualism as confusion and then wondering how we lost the ability to listen to reason. The point is not to "disidentify" as some theorists prescribe in order to mitigate identity politics and patriotic violence.⁵ It is to supplement one identity with others. Human beings are normally complex rather than seamless abstractions. Should we try to purge conflicting identities, as Charles Taylor urges?⁶ The very effort would vilify parts of the self and breed the self-hatred that purging claims to cure. If, instead, we learned to tolerate the normally melancholic overload of language and identity, we would train ourselves toward a humane acknowledgment of a world haunted by damaging efforts to cleanse and to conquer.

English as the shared language of the United States is an

indisputable anchor for U.S. civil society, but citizens should know at least one more language (not the same one, please, or we'll sound redundant and predictable) to put English here, and other hegemonic languages elsewhere, on edge and push or pull the anchor toward some wiggle room. Being on edge sharpens the wits, flexes democratic systems, and generally goads creativity. This is obvious to many bilinguals (and to African American code switchers).⁷ Monolinguals may not see the advantage if they don't feel the effects. Why, they can ask, would anyone want to make English nervous and play games that risk rights and resources?⁸ Better to be efficient and call *el pan pan, y el agua agua*.

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Efficiency is the sticking point for most debates about language in the United States: which policies promote English language learning and which are wasteful. The main concern is education, though legal rights come in second place. Aesthetic and intellectual stimulation have hardly mattered yet. What's the best (most cost-effective and quickest) way to integrate immigrants into the rights and obligations they came to exercise? The easy (efficient) answer is to teach them Standard English (or American, if you have real attitude about foreignness).⁹ Significantly, business theorists are far more likely to appreciate the creativity that comes from thinking in diverse codes than are policy makers.¹⁰ English-only immersion programs follow from facile, not innovative, answers, since they save the trouble and the money "misspent" on bilingual education. The money does worse than waste resources and keep immigrants ignorant of English, on this view. It panders to divisive ethnic pride and unravels the nation.¹¹

One popular defense of bilingual education plays on the same theme of efficiency, maybe to convince fiscal conservatives in their own rational terms but also to register that immigrants come to this land of economic opportunity to make

good on the “American dream.” They want to learn English in order to maximize their prospects. But learning is a process, so saving money on multilingual programs looks irrational and inefficient to many immigrants and to their friends. Effective assimilation, they say, is a gradual transfer from one language/culture to another. It finally costs more to throw immigrants (few swim) into immersion programs than to train them to use new strokes.¹² Maladjusted “foreigners” drop out of school, drain welfare budgets, and make worse trouble. The cold turkey cure is inefficient and mean, critics say. It’s also an embarrassment to democracy when “live free or die” (I’m writing this from New Hampshire) sounds like a fair choice.

Another bid for bilingualism downplays efficiency and promotes “richness.” Many languages represent social capital, is the argument. Bilingual programs create value, not as scaffolding to get immigrants into English, but through maintenance and development of our diverse social stock. Two-way programs do in fact double the advantages for both natives and newcomers. Diversification (varying stock is a sounder strategy than concentration) can venture some long-term risks and resist the narrower rationality of efficient transition. But even this defense of cultural difference as a source of diverse values and perspectives stays stuck in market (or is it ecological/romantic?) metaphors. Lose a language, and you’ve impoverished the world, because each language constitutes a distinct “psyche of a people.” The argument can fail to convince even the friends of bilingualism, let alone skeptics who know how to abstract a single translatable value from the variety. Let me mention one example of this Herderian axiom about different strokes for different folks in order to illustrate a range of examples that, paradoxically, follow the same broad strokes. Speakers of Lakota object to a “thingness” about English because it allegedly reifies spiritual meanings into objects. The

“sweat house,” for example, is a wooden translation for a mystical ceremony called *inikagapi* (“with it they make life”).¹³ But the contrast between sacred Lakota and secular English is bogus. It ignores the heated mystical tradition in Standard English, where, for instance, communion means much more than wafer eating. The Lakota case shows only that one tradition doesn’t easily understand another. More significantly for me, the case performs a cultural/political *desire* to value a particular language for its inherent qualities. Difference becomes content (thingness?) rather than the effect of opacity for outsiders and satisfaction for insiders.

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Differential effects are what matter. (Wittgenstein joked quite seriously that the essence of language was grammar, relation, not the things language can point to.)¹⁴ This is close to a recent conclusion that contrasting grammars of social relationships between East and West issue in different ways of thinking.¹⁵ Even if I can say the same thing or idea in more than one language, switching from one to another performs points of entry or exclusion, and it sets off different sounds-like associations or etymological echoes.¹⁶ These are asymmetrical effects to reckon with. The days of the one ideal reader or education have been numbered and spent in our segmented societies. A “target audience” can mean the target of exclusion or confusion. And feeling the unpleasant effect is one valid way of getting the point, or the kick, of a language game. “The more he dwelt on the humiliating episode, the less humiliating it appeared to him,” muses the émigré translator in Zinovy Zinik’s story. “The humiliation itself, paradoxically, was the only exciting aspect of his otherwise innocuous past existence in South London.” “‘I should have bought them a round,’ Victor would repeat to himself each time he recalled the episode, restless and lonely in his North London bed.”¹⁷

Even more basic than these hide-and-seek games is the fact

that overloaded systems unsettle meaning. When more than one word points to a familiar thing, the excess shows that no one word can own or be that thing. Several contending words point, each imperfectly. Even a proper noun like Hamlet is game for competition.¹⁸ Of course Hamlet worried enough about precarious arrangements (without code switching) to be an inviting target. “Whenever you were reduced to look up something in the English version (of the Russian *Gamlet*),” Nabokov’s Pnin complains, “you never found this or that beautiful, noble, sonorous line that you remembered all your life . . . Sad!”¹⁹ Words are not proper and don’t stay put. They wander into adjacent language fields, get lost in translation, pick up tics from foreign interference, and so can’t quite mean what they say. Teaching bilinguals about deconstruction is almost redundant. (“Big dill!,” Pnin might have said.)²⁰

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Meanness about bilingualism, therefore, damages more than immigrant transfers to the promised land, though that is bad enough. It is harmful to use bilingual education for language replacement, and worse to cancel the programs that do it gently.²¹ Worse still is the emotional stinginess of one particular language that cringes to hear others. But much worse even than these (arguably transitional) offenses is the civic and intellectual rigidity that meanness makes possible. Stingy defenses of monolingualism don’t hold the country together. Instead, they rend immigrant children from parents who don’t speak English and then wonder why the children lack respect for authority.²² The stinginess also stunts early cognitive development,²³ while learning a new language quickens the mind for adults too. The exercise turns out to be especially good at an advanced age. It keeps the mind agile and forestalls senility.²⁴ The *uneconomical* effort of language learning improves general lucidity and also does something more specific: a new language opens routes of thought that can detour around decayed or clogged pathways

of a first language. The United States is mature enough to take this advice seriously.

When it was young, the country practiced a bilingualism of sorts as it combined classical and modern political languages. Between those sources was wiggle room for an iconoclastic republic. Skeptical about established meaning, the founders refused the absolute claims of divine right. Then, popular reformers refused the conventional property restrictions that limited enfranchisement. How did the democratized republic manage to flex far enough to avoid failure? I'd like to suggest that the room for maneuver opened and stretched from the pull of different political languages. "Democratic republic" sounds familiar today, but the term is practically oxymoronic. It braces together the language of equality with that of freedom, preserving enough tension between the two to stay dynamic and philosophically bilingual, code switching between John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, contract and constitutional protection.²⁵ The liberal subject of politics (pluralist, variously associated) depends on this doubleness or multiplicity of perspectives. Historically, liberalism counted on the tensions between the languages of church and state, public and private, to sense the thrilling and risky emptiness of social arrangements that could be rearranged. This condition is good and necessary for democracy today, but it needs refreshment from another kind of bilingualism. This time it is cultural rather than political. When the design work of politics was new and daring, iconoclasm kept the designers vigilant about ready-made answers. By now the design has matured into a heritage with an enduring constitution, weighty amendments, and a history of trial and error that adds up to the bedrock of national values and practices. The emptiness at the core of liberal arrangements is today a heuristic device to think through possible reforms, not a license to trash institutions. (*Anarchy* is Brian Barry's

word to dismiss multicultural thought experiments that locate an empty moral center.)²⁶

What will keep us agile and vigilant today, while the threat of terrorism sets off presidential moves toward empire abroad and a garrison state at home? Democracy needs more perspective on its besieged condition than it can get from defensive Patriot Acts that would protect us by undoing constitutional protections. Perspective on rights comes sharply into focus around speakers of foreign languages (mostly Arabic now, as it was German during World War I and Japanese in World War II). Their violated rights signal the precariousness of rights for the rest of us.²⁷ We stay on edge by tolerating unfamiliar languages while staying vigilant about the danger that they represent and that monolingualism exacerbates. Learning those languages might open a detour around racial profiling and mass detentions toward distinguishing the blameless from the suspect.²⁸ Long before September 11, 2001, language differences were already presenting the most audible risks and opportunities for Western democracies. With mass migrations and stubborn or dignified (perspective matters) defenses of particularity, differences don't easily go away. They make both natives and newcomers uncomfortable and self-conscious, maybe self-reflective. Is that bad for democracy? I invite you to consider how good it can be.

A few years ago, I wrote a sober “Advertencia/Warning” to preface *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (1999). That book offers provisional names and examples of bilingual and other tropes that maneuver in the asymmetries that classical rhetoric, counting on cultural continuity, doesn't consider. The new tropes call attention to the culturally coded unevenness of information and power. Moves can hold out a chance for intimacy with the reader, and then hold back. “Slaps and embraces” Toni Morrison called the

syncopated rhythm of minority performances. So far, there's been little response to my "rhetoric of particularism." Possibly, the general point about putting readers off is off-putting. *Bilingual Aesthetics* develops that point with a more welcoming approach. I learned the difference, and other lessons, from Sigmund Freud. He published his little joke book, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), barely five years after the major tome *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). That book disappointed readers and the readings disappointed Freud, as he explains in a pause between jokes that work like dreams, but more enjoyably. The heavy book left readers confused or skeptical, if not upset; the light one was sure to entertain and maybe win them over.

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To honor the master, chapter 1 starts with two good jokes by and about immigrants. The humor depends on a home language that lets immigrants laugh with and at authorities. I hope that the title, "Choose and Lose," will sound funny too, after decades of one-way melt-down assimilation. The choice between home and host languages sounds downright un-American, as we will hear from Marilyn Monroe. Many of us have refused to choose and lose, even when we feel strange, dis-mis-placed, and unidentifiable. My own refusnik adolescence occasionally experimented with choices, starting from Yiddish speakers at home and Puerto Rican partners at play. I serially impersonated possibilities, as I said in a prologue to a book about the foundational fictions that constructed new nations from foreign misfits.²⁹ For each language or foreign inflection there was another persona. Much later, I understood that real authenticity means being more than one.

A more illustrious immigrant, like Hans Kohn (author of *American Nationalism*, 1956), wasn't playing games. He was congratulating himself and us for coming to this country, where Liberty holds her lamp (a lady and light that were fogged over

when our boat came in) and where we were all equally free to be patriots as a matter of civic contract, not ethnic pedigree. But my new world was no freely entered agreement; it was a cluster of accents with a hollow cultural center that gave us misfits some wiggle room. (Need I say that Woody Allen's *Zelig* is my favorite film?) Where I grew up, only children spoke English without an accent, so the occasional adult who spoke that way (say, a teacher) lacked the linguistic density that made our Italian, Hispanic, Chinese, Jewish parents so admirably adult, and so embarrassingly out of place. With my double consciousness of would-be American and European has-been, desire and dread stayed deadlocked, thank goodness. Between them was the playground where surprises happen.

"Aesthetics Is a Joke," chapter 2, links art and humor through the effect of surprise. Bilinguals are full of surprises whether they like it or not. Borrowing cognates that turn out to be "false friends" or collapsing high and low registers that don't sound so very different from a distance, even correct usage delivers double entendres to double-talkers. Foreigners are often artful and funny. Freud found this a double advantage, since outsiders know enough to laugh at themselves whereas nativist one-way jokes victimize outsiders. Almost simultaneously, formalist Victor Shklovsky was pointing out the connection between art and surprise in essays that track the aesthetic effect through difficult and rough writing, often in funny texts. Surprise refreshes perception and rekindles love of the world for the formalist. For Freud, the spark of surprise relieves repression and prepares for another cycle of liminality and laughter.

"Irritate the State," chapter 3, suggests what foreignness can do for the country, politically. The gains for hosts can be more than narrowly economic. Difficulty itself is a goad to procedural neutrality, just as it promotes aesthetic effects by blocking habitual perception. Cultural habits and preconceptions

can mire due process, so that confronting other cultural assumptions makes procedure a necessary lingua franca for self-government. The subjects of such confrontations belong to two cultures, at least. Double consciousness is, then, the normal and flexible if somehow neurotic condition of late modern life. Anything less seems cruel as well as politically dangerous.

“The Common Sense Sublime,” chapter 4, recommends more, not less, refinement for facing the fear of foreignness. Kant is an ally for multiculturalism, despite some conservative claims on him. While some teachers object to cultural particularism because it allegedly dismisses aesthetics, the aesthetic attractions of foreign, even fearsome, cultural differences can claim our attention. The disturbing sublime offers more intense effects than does easily lovable beauty. The sublime elicits respect, not love; and it offers a thrill of survival close to catharsis. Few of us avoid fear today in a world where neighbors are often strangers. Can strangeness be our nonviolent commonality? Perhaps, but it will take the refinement of a new sentimental education. We will have to prepare reason to process the pain of incomprehension into the pleasure of contemplating a complicated world.

“Let’s Play Games,” chapter 5, ends the book by teasing Ludwig Wittgenstein. This last chapter could have been the first because Wittgenstein prescribed a general and radical therapy for all those philosophers and language teachers who worry about what is correct in language: What can we know? How are we and the world constructed by language? The therapy was to stop worrying. Language may not work the way we expect it to; it may not be neat and predictable, but it works in particular uses and contexts. Describe language, don’t explain it, was his prescription. Why, then, doesn’t he describe normal uses that mix “natural languages”? Wittgenstein himself begs the question with lessons that wean us from false problems and with

his own bilingual performances that he doesn't deign to describe. Was he residually attached to universal validity in a univocal mode? Other iconoclasts, including Freud and Derrida, have also held back from breaching monolingualism. Mikhail Bakhtin noticed the cost of such caution: human sciences miss their targets of study precisely because they limit evidence to one language at a time and ignore the normal clusters of living language. Most people live in, or at least alongside, more than one language. This makes switching codes (cultures, perspectives) common. Switching complicates meanings, intentionally or not, both for players who are "in" on the intricate language games and for those who play odd man out. From any position, playing can be, and feel, funny.

Enjoy the varied company. Enjoy yourselves. Abraham Lincoln recommends it.