

Language and Identity

by
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I was ten when my German teacher Margite Schwab wrote in my signature album the inscription by the renowned classical German poet J. W. Goethe: "The more languages you speak, the more people you are worth." I wondered whether Goethe had spoken in my native Croatian, but I did not dare to ask my teacher.

As I grew up, I came to understand that Goethe's "more people" in one person, including me, were to be "invented" by learning not only foreign languages, but also their own cultural background and history. The teacher of my native Croatian, Marija Marusic, wrote in my signature album another simple but crucial sentence: "Remember, only the perfect knowledge of your native language and culture will form up your identity."

However, when I was ten I still did not know the meaning of many words and I was much more impressed by opening my signature album where relief leaves and flowers decorated the light brown leather cover page. Still, the small secure letters of my teachers and parents, put down on white thick paper with a dark blue Leonardo ink, and collected in strong words that ran within perfect smooth strings, gave me the first visual image of language's riches. The seed of future experiences had already taken root in my signature album. I thought of that some years later, admiring handwriting, drawings and manuscripts written by such greats as Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Machiavelli, Blake, Goethe, and others.

But what is language? What is identity?

According to the Random House Dictionary of the English Language (1966):

... language is the body of words and systems for their use common to a people who are of the same community or nation, or the same cultural tradition. Language is any system of formalized symbols, signs, gestures, or the like, used or conceived as a means of communicating thought, emotions, etc."

The definition of identity states that "... identity is the condition of being oneself or itself, and not another." The two key words in these definitions might be communication and oneself. The triangle of language, communication and oneself has forever enclosed the identity of human beings.

Who are we?

Goethe thought that a knowledge of many languages would make the question easier, or at least, would widen one's identity by multiplying his or her possibility to communicate with people from different nations and cultures.

I was eleven when I wrote my first letter in German to my Austrian friend Sieglinde. I was more proud of having "an adult friend in the foreign language" than of my letter which described my room, my sister Olga, my parents, my signature album, and the concern for my still limited German. Sieglinde was writing about her job as a secretary, her twin sister, big Christmas trees in the city of Innsbruck, and her fiance Adi. Our long term correspondence helped me to develop through love, respect, and childish curiosity toward Sieglinde, the same qualities toward her country, her language, the Viennese Sacher cake, and especially the letters. The epistles will become an important part in my later creative writing even though I think there is no qualitative difference between these two things.

I was fifteen when I started to learn French by developing friendly correspondence with a girl, Francoise, in Lyon. I was nineteen when I started to learn Italian at the university by developing an epistolary friendship with the young man, Gian-Carlo, in Naples. And English was around all the time, rolling in our ears and dancing from the British and American music, films, and TV shows.

However, none of my foreign friends knew any Croatian. The reality that my native language does not belong to the great, powerful branches of the world's leading languages did not discourage me. I rather felt a kind of ambiguous satisfaction that I possessed a special secret. But this special secret was also my subconscious defense against the colonial arrogance of so called "big nations" and "leading languages." While these "great nations" dominated the history, politics, and culture of the smaller nations, they discounted the value of "the rest of the world," and also their own heritage, history, power and "passion to know."

I was sixteen when I started to travel through Europe with my sister Olga. Encouraged by our parents, we were roaming around discovering that our images of the foreign places were often more a mirror of our enthusiasm for life abroad than an image of its real shape. But what is real, what unreal in expectations, dreams, recognitions and pleasures of youth?

A division of identity was already celebrating its victory. I experienced it another way in Paris in 1974 while celebrating the New Year with a group of friends. A few Italians joined us after midnight, and one of them asked me after a short conversation which part of the city of Turin I lived in. I said that I had never been in Turin, and that I was not even Italian. He just laughed and said that I could not cheat him. I said that he would very soon see through my still limited Italian that I was someone else. He then laughed louder, adding that this was just a cliché used by people who would like to cover their real identity and to be someone else.

Cases like that one are still confirming my certainty within my uncertainty that understanding of language and identity is a complex mask, an endless travesty of the self. The more I try to serve Goethe's "more different people," the more I am aware how their demands are growing and putting in question complexity of the real self. But who, again, is the real self? How to recognize the stability of one's identity?

While talking or writing, for example, in English, I am still aware how the action of my thinking passes through the struggle of the choice of words and meaning, forming or not forming within a specific chemical process a syntactic,

grammatical, idiomatic, metric, rhythmical, and meaningful sense: a new language. However, the same thing might be considered while writing in my native Croatian as well. But there is one principal difference: in the complicated process of writing, the native language behaves in a totality of one's life experiences, and a foreign language behaves as a fragment in the totality of one's experiences. That means that I examine my native language within all possible dimensions given to me by my background as well, and I examine a foreign language within the limited part of all these dimensions. This is like suddenly stepping out from the sunny day into a cloudy evening. Outlines of the words and meanings become thick and distant. Most parts of this foreign landscape are still recognizable, but there are no words to name them.

The challenge of trying a foreign language produces at the same time a lot of frustrations and a lot of fun. As children we used to play the game "Spoiled Telephone." Around ten of us would sit down one next to another, and the first child in a row would whisper very quietly one word to his or her neighbor. This one would do the same to his or her neighbor, and the intention was to spoil the word, or even the world, to play to it, to make the neighbor think about the word. Of course, a transformation between the first and the last word and world in the spoiled telephone line was much more important than the final result which always got a lot of laughs. For example, the first child quietly mumbled the word chair, and within the transformation process the chair became fair-beer-bear-dear-clear-beard-grid-frigid-puckish and finally, the last child in the row would exclaim: the factory! And we all would laugh knowing that one of the words in a chain was a part of the word factory we had made. The "Spoiled Telephone" game helped me to associate the meaning of one word within another, crystallizing metaphor and playfulness as vital parts of my writing. There is nothing what better describes the nature of identity than metaphor. Metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing is spoken of as it were another. Oneself in another. While having difficulties in writing, talking or even understanding some words and meanings in foreign languages, I keep thinking of the "Spoiled Telephone" game as of a metaphoric help providing the parallel meaning and alternative ways of understanding. This is not a poetic recipe to translate a word with a feeling rather than with a dictionary, however,

but a reminder that the power of every language at first gives in its polyphonic meaning the nature of its cultural environment.

Once, while talking with a friend about language and identity, I pointed out that my intention in all my work is to put together the divided person from the languages, events, countries I've been in. "But then, who really are you?" asked the amazed friend.

We all are examining the many different disintegrations of our identity and trying somehow to translate our imaginative life into the real one. But the real problem appears when a people try to translate their real life into the imaginative one. This case is indicative for totalitarian systems which have produced in their anti-cultures and anti-politics a destructive, lying, cynical and brutal surrogate of the public language. A censorship of the public language is at the same time the censorship of the personal and collective identity.

The usual disintegration of identity is caused rather by some positive factors, among which I would give a priority to the passion to know. In this passion to know one willingly adopts the particles from the foreign cultures and languages, mixing them with one's native background, and producing a new cultural integration which I call "the world in between." In the early twentieth century, the philosopher Edmund Husserl considered the passion to know as the essence of spirituality which we might see at the end of the twentieth century as a still crucial call for a re-thinking and re-arrangement of the individual's human rights, thoughts, and needs in spiritless societies.

A matter of language and identity is an old cultural chess game in which combinations of language and identity, language of identity, identity of language, language within identity, identity within language, and so forth, are not only the linguistic, philosophical, metaphorical, and historic black and white LANGTITY game, but also the creative energy that again and again opens the borders of different human experiences placed in exciting and sometimes dangerous events.