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The Bridwell Quill. Issues 9-12: Clear Language, Conscious Society

Anthony Elia

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The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



May-August 2019

Issue 9-12: *Clear Language, Conscious Society*

Joseph Stalin liked preachers. Perkins School of Theology trains preachers. Ergo..., well, okay—before I get ahead of myself with a refresher in high school level logic, let me explain. I started reading a book I'd picked up a few years ago and never got around to until recently. The book, *In Confidence:*



Anatoly Dobrynin
in later years

Moscow's Ambassador to Six Cold War Presidents, is the memoir of late Soviet diplomat and statesman, Anatoly Dobrynin (1919-2010) whose long, illustrious, and preeminent career demonstrated one of the fullest expressions of international diplomacy in the twentieth century. He also symbolized the end of an era, a

tradition, and legacy of Russian-Soviet statesmanship. In his early days as a diplomat, he had been stationed in Washington, DC, where he had become helpful as an interpreter of the American political landscape, but also particularly as someone with a fairly good command of English. His senior colleague and later Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Gromyko (1909-1989) had been working at the United Nations and other areas of the United States during the Cold War but was not as well-spoken or able in the English language as his colleague. As Dobrynin reports in his memoir:

Gromyko recalled that in sending him as ambassador to Washington, Stalin had given him a piece of advice. Upon learning that Gromyko did not know English too well, Stalin advised him to go to American churches on Sunday and listen to the sermons. He said that the preachers spoke a language understandable to plain people and since the sermons reflected their congregation's everyday needs and aspirations, in this way he would be able to get an idea of the domestic situation. (Stalin seemed to have based this advice on his experience as a young seminarian years before). ... Of course, once in Washington Gromyko did not dare visit

churches, but as he later confessed, he had regularly listened to the sermons of popular preachers on the radio.—Dobrynin, p. 22.

Who knew Stalin had a warm spot in his heart for Presbyterian or Methodist sermons? What would he have thought of a Fosdick or Thurman!? Or, that a place like Perkins School of Theology might produce well-rounded, articulate, and plain-spoken exemplars for the likes of Soviet *politerati* from whom to learn clearly spoken and understandable English?

Indeed, clear, concise, and communicative language is a beautiful thing, if done well and right. Academics and scholarly types have a tendency toward verbosity. I admit that I often fall into this very trap. A few issues into writing *The Bridwell Quill*, some colleagues had expressed their support of the publication, but had admitted that some of the words were a bit of a stretch: “what were you talking about!?” The English language is full of great words, some are absurdly useless and out-of-touch with reality, while others are sweet and succinctly perfect. I've read a few writers in the last few weeks, who've openly admitted that they have found their early-career writings to be boorish and self-indulgent with grand landscaping words like “fissiparous,” “lalochezia,” and “ultracrepidarian.” And yet, while words like these are amazingly rich, they may also put off the reader and force writers into boxes of arrogant adulation. Admittedly, as a teenager, I was very much a proponent of using such long, obscure Latinate words, like *pulchritude*, in place of *beauty*, for example. Dare I say that now, though! We have a wealth of words that are long, in fact the word for “big words” is *sesquipedalian*, which literally means “a foot and a half long.” The English language is unique, and because of its size and expansiveness it has expressed its dominant nature in great part because of the colonial growth of the British empire—but this has had its own

issues and problems. The coloniality of language is something that has a powerful meaning and reach, yet so too does the present attempt at *decoloniality* of language, or the mode of combatting the overreach of majority languages and their impact on diminishing or overpowering minority languages.

We could look throughout history on how “big” languages with many speakers edged out “small” languages with few speakers—such as with Etruscan in the antiquity of the Mediterranean or the Tangut language spoken by peoples of the Western Xia from the 11th century in China, yet both were extinguished by a more prominent state and language of commerce or government.

In some cases, older languages have left their marks by imposing descriptive structures, vocabulary, and slang on other (sometimes newer) languages—as when the Académie française rejected various Anglicisms like e-mail in favor of *courriel* (courrier + électronique). A curious example of this legacy is how Latin has inadvertently been used to colonize the English language through grammatical imposition. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, grammarians and writers overlaid Latin grammar rules onto English in a number of ways, including the now infamous “split infinitive” rule, which is really more a form of prescriptive (rather than descriptive) grammar. The somewhat arbitrary rule, which is now merely a vestigial guide for schoolchildren, was imposed by the gatekeepers of bygone days, who saw that in Latin verbs you could not split the infinitive. There are those contemporary scholars who debate this today—some in agreement, while others not. And then there are the stories of those claiming that the split infinitive rule came about because split infinitives were being abused with excessive adverbs, like “She had to happily, abundantly, and beautifully sing.” And we know that it would be artistically bland to say “to go boldly” rather than the stylistically mellifluous “to boldly go...” as the Trekkies say.

In respect to how our language has grown and spread, we should consider what has been

happening to many other languages—native or indigenous languages; family languages; sign languages; or even examples like in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China where there are languages distinctively spoken only by women (called Nüshu). Some scientists and scholars have said that the world has 6,500 languages, but that nearly 26 languages die every year (or one language every two weeks).



Musqueam Members in British Columbia (early 20th cent.)

The whole enterprise of coloniality and language expansion and use came up recently, when I attended a conference in Vancouver, Canada. What was fascinating about this experience was how we as visitors were being introduced to the relationship between the Canadian government and the First Nations (native Musqueam people). There is a marked difference in the

socio-political and linguistic relationship that exists among native peoples and governments in the Americas, broadly speaking, but it is something to be recognized from the icy banks of Kugluktuk township in Nunavut, among the polar reaches, through the American West of Navajo, Apache, and Cheyenne, to the southern climes of the continent, with the Ashanincas in Brazil or Enxet in Paraguay. The language of the people is often in conflict with government officials throughout the Western hemisphere—and it is well documented that even with declines in many indigenous languages, there are still many people who only speak those languages, and are increasingly impacted by contextual pressures of crime, poverty, and hunger. The very things that are among the flashpoints of our own political discourse, have been reported in the New York Times in this unusual framework, of indigenous language in contrast to the dominant languages of our continents—English and Spanish. As one article from the Times noted in March 2019: “Anyone Speak K’iche or Mam?”—indigenous languages of



Guatemala. The main concern being that there are transient immigrants showing up at various borders, who only speak their indigenous tongue, but are in great need of medical, legal, or financial help, and can only be communicated with in their local language—not Spanish or English.

We know that the English language is by most estimates the most spoken language on the planet—it is in competition with Mandarin Chinese, where both run at about 1.1+ billion speakers. But the long history of English colonial expansion hath wrought the linguistic hegemony that now dominates most Western academic and journalistic enterprises, but also those in other reaches of the world. This expansive use of language has other implications—how a globalization of supposed linguistic unity both attracts people toward the economic benefits of knowing English or Mandarin (or even Hindi, Arabic, Spanish, or Russian) for better jobs and lifestyles, while at the expense of forgoing and forgetting local languages, smaller languages, less “profitable” or “useful” languages. Of course, these descriptors are neither accurate nor charitable. The languages of families and small towns from rural Zamfara or Yobe in northern Nigeria to Luri spoken by the Lurs in Western Iran or even the Tungusic language of Evenki spoken in parts of Siberia are all discreet, while important expressions of human communication and culture, yet each is increasingly threatened by the encroachment of global linguistic expansionism. Even those diverse tongues that have long been part of the American continents, both north and south, where native Americans have spoken beautifully complex languages for millennia, the steady creep of English has consumed the linguistic nuances and timbre of many indigenous populations over the last century and a half.

In a 9-minute film titled “Who Speaks Wukchumni?” featured in the NYT online in August 2014, we encounter the story of Marie Wilcox, who is described as the “last fluent speaker

of *Wukchumni*, a Native American language.” Through her diligence and devotion to her heritage and culture, she devoted more than seven years to



Marie Wilcox (2016)
by T.L. Kreger

the compilation of a Wukchumni dictionary, published the same year as the short film about her. According to various sources, the language which once had more than fifty-thousand speakers, is now down to less than 200 members of the indigenous group (Yokuts), living mostly in California, of

whom as we noted only Marie is a fluent speaker. This inspirational short film is both telling and poignant in its reflection on the past and future in conflict. The relation between government and indigeneity even in language plays out significantly in both the United States and Canada. The Canadians (both indigenous and others) have sought to bridge the linguistic gap through education and work especially in universities—I am not aware of as significant an equivalent in the US system. One of the most amazing names I’ve ever seen is that of a library at the University of British Columbia (UBC) called the *Xwi7xwa* Library (I was told it is pronounced SHWI-SHWA). Though it looks like something out of computer coding, it is not—rather it is the language of the Musqueam and this language finds its way, rightfully so, into the many signs that adorn and direct people on the campus of UBC (<https://xwi7xwa.library.ubc.ca/>).

For a long time, I had without much thought tossed around the word “dialect” to describe lesser used or what’s often called “minority languages,” or languages which have few speakers, comparatively. And then, I remembered reading a grammatical dictionary of Sicilian, in which the author made a claim that “dialects” were actually rather political statements made by the “majority” language lexicographers and grammarians. This is quite accurate. In fact, Alessandro Manzoni’s (1785-1873) novel *I promessi sposi* (1827) or “The Betrothed,” as it is generally translated, has been



seen as a crystallization and unification of “standard modern Italian,” even though it is effectively the dialect of the economically and politically dominant class of early 19th century Italy—Florentine Tuscan. Power, money, and influence all play into how language is determined, or rather how a *dialect* becomes a *language*. As perhaps my favorite definition of a language declares: a language

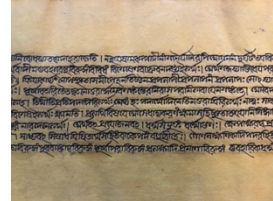


Manzoni's Portrait by Francesco Hayez

is a dialect with an army. The truth of this statement lies in the power of its meaning and that which stands behind and gives strength to the argument. Clear language and the power of words is somewhat of a double-edged sword, though—because as Stalin was using this for his leaders to be better communicators, simple basic language is that which is used to control, influence, and manipulate crowds, masses, and the populace. It is the very language formation that is utilized today: in pithy forms and slogans, which are easy to remember. Like the Mad Men of the advertising age: simple, clear, and easy to remember. Yet it is with this kind of language that we are both able to communicate *and* influence. In recent conversations with colleagues and staff, we’ve debated the impact that signs and symbols in language take on in influencing how we think, act, and vote, for example. Nonetheless, we are surrounded in our society by the spectrum of language arbiters, from linguistic and spiritual arsonists (those who set ablaze our worlds and sacred spaces with abusive words and self-righteous flames) to the tempering salves of curative poetry and therapeutic psalms of the human spirit. And these can come in any form of language, representation, or cadence, from songs to Biblical passages and letters from children to their parents, from whom they were separated on a border crossing.

In Bridwell, we have the earliest printed Bible from British North America, which happens to be in a Native American language (from 1663—the Eliot

Bible). It has been described variously as “the Massachusetts Language,” “Algonquian,” and “Wôpanâak.” We have a diversity of languages, lesser known and used, even of works of different styles, scripts, and physical materials. (We even



reviewed some Southeast Asian materials in Thai, Burmese, and a Bengali-script seen in the image at left, which were recently identified by faculty visitors). All of

these texts that are held within these walls are a communication between the past and present, no matter what the language—long “dead” or still quite “alive.” Even if we are living in a world dominated by one language, we need to persist in our recognition of how languages have formed the worlds of human history, from ancient Bhārata and Yokut homelands to contemporary Dallas. Among Bridwell colleagues, we discuss language and writing at length. One particular case of word choice that we’ve debated is the use of the word “munificence” in one of our engraved dedications from the early 1990s. I personally like this word, but it is not a commonly used term and may be seen as too bombastic. In an odd coincidence, I discovered that Dr. Anita Pisch of Australian National University, who wrote *The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929-1953* described the former Soviet leader as having “munificence” that extended beyond Russia’s borders. That is the extent of our parallels, but I will say that even if Bridwell never becomes its own personality cult, it will attract the attention of students and scholars to research its *magnificent* collections and use language that is just as powerful.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

Anthony J. Elia, Director and J.S. Bridwell Foundation Endowed Librarian

aelia@smu.edu

