Radix

More Than Words: Language as a Barrier
A Message from the Editor

"Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly,' and they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad.' The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, 'Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad..." (Genesis 11:1-9, NRSV)

This is an ancient Jewish narrative, now held to be divinely inspired by Muslims, Catholics, and Protestants, and Orthodox Christians as well. Whether the text was intended as historical, literary, or mythical (most likely some combination of the three), it makes one thing clear: people don't work together effectively when they can't understand each other.

Many of us have experienced the frustration of "language barrier." (I remember a fellow ESL teacher in South Korea asking for one inch to be trimmed off her long hair, and ending up with hair one-inch long all over her head!) We use dictionaries, translation software, and take classes to learn at least one other language, but linguists warn us that even translation and second-language-learning do not guarantee that we will grasp the nuances of native speakers' writers. (Northrop Frye, the famous Canadian literary critic, writes, "no translation of anything worth reading is of much use except as a crib to the original."

The barrier begins as soon as we're born! Although as babies we have the potential to make every possible phonetic sound, we only end up using the small set of phonemes learned in early childhood. And just as our mother tongue limits the sounds our mouths will be capable of forming, it also limits the ways we will be able to think as adults. So speaking a different language means you not only have trouble with WHAT a person or text is saying, you also have trouble with WHY!

I'm afraid, though, that language barriers are even more complicated than that. Most of my classes at McGill take place entirely in English; the professors, students, and texts use words found, for the most part, in the Oxford English Dictionary. We are not, however, speaking the same language. We may use the same terms, but have wildly different definitions. We may value the same things, but call them by different names. We may speak the language of science and fact, but really be speaking about assumptions and faith!

I'm beginning to think that this is the biggest problem of all time: the metaproblem! Is it overly optimistic to believe that wars, sexism, poverty, and hatred could often be avoided if the participants could speak each other's "language?" When our (mental) dictionary definitions for things like "a Muslim" or "a Christian" are informed by the mainstream media, we start to believe that these are negative words, and are able to condemn whole people groups, based on sensationalistic stereotypes. When hidden value judgements creep into language itself, children can be raised with overly black-and-white worldviews that allow them to grow up as adults capable of swallowing "good-guys and bad-guys" rationalizations for anything from neglecting to bombing the perceived "other."

It is the goal of the Radix to allow McGill students a voice [in their religious "language" of choice] that can be heard without prejudice. Whatever your cultural or spiritual roots may be, you are welcome to speak here, as long as you are willing to listen too. So often our spiritual or religious selves need to be excluded in order to be accepted in modern society, but it is becoming increasingly obvious that faith is our mother tongue.

We're starting another building project... but towers are so passé. Let's try bridges this time.

~Sara Parks Ricker is a McGill Graduate Student in Religious Studies

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Radix@yours.com

Did Something Get You Thinking?

Articles, responses, rants, artwork, poetry, book reviews, and photos wanted!

Theme for the Upcoming Issue: "Warmth"

deadline November 20

Submissions may be edited for length and clarity. Contributors retain the copyright to their submissions, but Radix retains the right to reprint published submissions in web format for our online archives. By the way, if you happen to have web design and site-building skills, we just may have a little job for you. Please email chaplancy@staff.mcgill.ca or call 398-4104.

The Radix is proud to use recycled paper. Please pass on the recycling by handing this newsletter on to a friend (unless you really want to keep it!)

"The people who call themselves humanists, and who include students of literature, have always been primarily people who studied other languages. The basis of the

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The views expressed by our contributors are not necessarily those of McGill Chaplaincy or the Radix. That's what "interfaith dialogue" is all about!
Art Speaks

Having spent a year studying in Italy, I’m pretty familiar with the difficulties of communicating with people from different places. One obvious problem is the language barrier: speaking with locals, I was lucky if I could get a simple point across; the subtleties of both English and Italian were usually lost in translation. What I found far more difficult to overcome, however, was the cultural barrier, which (among other things) prevented my host mother and me from ever properly understanding one another. She was quite convinced that I was a trouble-making, disrespectful American. For my part, I considered her a cruel and tyrannical Italian matriarch.

There was one area, though, where we found some common ground. I really enjoy Italian Renaissance art; everything from Giotto to Caravaggio to Da Vinci. As it turned out, my host mother was every bit as passionate as I, much more so in fact, about her homeland’s cultural heritage. And so, while we clashed on cleaning, my clothing, curfew, and everything else that came up, we could always sit together with a book of paintings and reflect on the beauty and creativity of the old Italian masters.

This mutual interest brought us, on a family trip to Florence, to the famous Uffizi art gallery. While my host father and host brother roamed the city, my host mom and I passed a full day walking slowly through the corridors, pausing at nearly every display and losing ourselves in the splendor of them all. Pena, in her most simplified and patient Italian, would attempt to explain to me the significance of various lesser-known works, and together we would banter enthusiastically about pieces that we both knew and loved.

Late in the day, we happened upon a particularly touching depiction of Christ bearing the cross. As my host mother crossed herself and spoke a quiet prayer, I felt a sense of spirituality that I had never before experienced — the emotion and the power of true, unflappable faith. I have long identified myself as agnostic, and until that moment I had never quite grasped how people could believe in a God without any proof. I feel that I understand that now.

I’ve come to realize that language, with all its subtleties and mixed messages, may not be the best way to bridge the gap between people. On the other hand, art is a wonderful medium of expression, capable of capturing in its various forms much of the deeper meaning that mere language fails to convey. Through painting, sculpture, dance, music, and poetry, I think we citizens of the world could finally come to fully understand one another.

Lou Kosak
Arts UO

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Bahais

on Language Barriers:

Bahais advocate a universal auxiliary language to facilitate communication among people of all countries and languages. Adherents would speak their own native language but also learn a second, worldwide language.

(from www.bahai.org)

“The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.”

- Bahaullah, founder of the Bahai faith.

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cultural heritage of English speaking peoples is not in English; it’s in Latin and Greek and Hebrew. This basis has to be given the young student in translation.
Women in Islam

Islam is being largely misrepresented in the media. It is portrayed as a religion of war and intolerance. In addition, women in Islam have been portrayed as repressed by and inferior to men.

Being a Muslim girl at McGill University and having been brought up in a Muslim country, I find this general attitude to be quite misleading and far from the truth.

Due to publicity of only extremist Islamic regimes, such as the Taliban regime and Saudi Arabia, there is a general opinion that Islam does not promote equality between men and women. The facts that women were not allowed to go to school in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime and are not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia are not faults of Islam. The reason for these strict rules is not religion but the misinterpretation of the Qur'an and illiteracy of the people imposing the rules. There are a lot of rules that are imposed on women in such extremist states that are not Islamic but instead erroneous rules imposed more by the society than religion.

The opinion of the general public is shaped to a great extent by what is shown and said on TV, and what is written in the newspapers. After September 11th, the mainstream media focussed on the Taliban regime and its rules and oppression of women. There were programs that showed cruelty toward women, such as beatings. All this was blamed on Islam.

Islam is a religion that encourages equality between women and men. It promotes women getting an education equal to that of any man. Islam bases a lot of its traditions on the life and doings of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) (Hadith). The Prophet’s wife (Aisha) was one of the most literate and well-versed of the Prophet’s (p.b.u.h) companions. This indicates that Islam as a religion does not promote illiteracy in women.

Equality between the two sexes can also be seen in any aspect of life. Under Islam, a woman is entitled to get an education as far she wants, to choose her own husband, and to work in a decent profession if she chooses.

There is a general point of view that the hijab symbolizes either forced silence or radical, unconscionable militancy. Actually, it’s neither. The hijab is a scarf that covers the head, neck, and throat. Although most people see it as oppression I find it to be quite the opposite. The hijab takes the attention away from a woman’s physical appearance and puts stress on her personality and abilities. It is there to make women equal to men so they are not judged for how they look but for what they can do. The Qur’an says that no one should be judged according to gender, beauty, wealth, or privilege. In Islam, everyone is equal in these respects. The only thing that makes one person better than another is her or his character.

The only point I want to make is that Islam is not what it has been painted to be. Before anyone makes a judgment or forms an opinion on this religion, they should look at religion from a more liberal point of view than what is shown on TV.

- Rabia Tahir Khan

Jihad in the Media

I used to enjoy watching CNN and other news channels. It’s good to know what is going on in the world. Now, I can’t watch anything without feeling a certain amount of resentment towards the extreme comments openly made against Muslims. What changed?

Around two years ago, if someone heard the word Muslim, or saw a man with a beard, it wouldn’t be such a major concern. After September 11th, a person’s religious preference has become a focal point, and people are refusing to sit in the same airplane with an Arabic man!

Words like “terrorist” are constantly being used in conjunction with Muslims. The whole world now knows the word “jihad.” But what do these words really mean? What is “jihad”? What is a terrorist, and has it been correctly associated with Muslims?

In the media, the word “jihad” is used synonymously with attacks against America. The general public has come to see Islam as a religion that promotes hatred towards any other faith and also as a religion of closed-mindedness. How much truth is there to this image? Islam is a religion that is based on the Qur’an. As a religion, Islam promotes peace and acceptance.

“Jihad” refers to a holy war that does not necessarily have to be physical. In Islam, there is a lot of stress on the concept of spiritual war with oneself, to better yourself and your lifestyle. This is also termed Jihad. It could be something as simple as someone’s struggle to get through college and obtain a good education.

Islam does not promote senseless war. Rather, it promotes peace and equality among all humans. There is a huge communication gap between what Islam is and what the general opinion of it is. One of the major reasons is that the Qur’an has been largely misrepresented by illiterate people, and taught incorrectly to others who follow them blindly. I think the solution to misinterpretation of Islam is to educate the people spreading it and those believing it, but also to educate the media and people who are forming opinions based on a few examples. The media portrayal of Islam is based on examples taken from extremism. This gives the public the impression that all Muslims are terrorists. The media are criticizing Islam constantly for its rules and regulations, as they do not comply with North American rules and regulations. But what they are failing to comprehend is that Islam is not necessarily a wrong way of life, just different from the North American norm.

- Taimoor Ali Choudhry

although no translation of anything worth reading is of much use except as a crib to the original. Nowadays the modern languages take a more prominent place in
Words Not "Religiously Correct"

Verbal language is, no doubt, the most ineffective means of communication! Research has shown that the largest proportion of effective communication stems from the non-verbal. This has to do predominantly with the fact that the propensity to misinterpret a person’s words is much higher than his or her facial expression and other body language.

Religion, especially in the Middle East, plays the most important role in developing a person’s character, and even determines their choice of friends later in life. Impressions and opinions of other religions are so ingrained in individuals from childhood that many choose to avoid them completely. I have occasionally encountered devout believers who have given me, a “non-believer” or “infidel” as I am commonly referred to, a chance to question and debate the truth of their and other religions. But, for the most part, I have come to conclude that there really is no “right” way to broach this subject without turning it into a mini-war!

No words are "religiously correct" enough in discussions like these to avoid miscommunication, misinterpretation, and misunderstanding. Publicly, society in these countries is governed by religious law to a great extent. Therefore, language and opinions used outside the home are limited to those deemed "acceptable”.

Religion, and this is just my opinion, creates more intolerance and prejudice than any other aspect of our lives. If the purpose of religion is to bring the human race together and for us to live good and decent lives in our time on earth, then why even have a term to describe a person of a different faith?

~Anonymous Management Marketing student

The Tolerance Barrier

Multifaceted people have not mastered multiple languages merely academically. They have experienced and appreciated the different cultures that they have encountered. Most of them have lived in different countries and traveled the world. We all have had TAs or professors who don’t articulate their ideas distinctly, but the student who fares well in that class is the one who makes the effort to address doubts and confusions to surpass the language barrier.

The world is getting smaller, but this only accentuates the barriers. (In the early 1990s there wasn’t an issue of having to learn differential equations from a Vietnamese professor.) On the whole, though, we have benefited immensely from globalization’s exchange of cultural groups and ideas.

The issue here is more than language; it’s tolerance! Picture living in an idealistic unilingual world. I’m sure that wars, sexism, hatred, etc. would still be present. Language barriers do have socio-religious implications, but their effects are incidental. It is our human race that is inherently flawed. The famous Milgram’s experiment shows the extent of human depravity irrespective of race and gender.

The good news is that there aren’t new major languages being invented every day. Therefore, hypothetically on a long enough timeline, there could be a unification of languages. But a common language is still not enough to truly understand the differences in cultures. It’s getting accustomed to people’s diverse backgrounds and making an effort to have an open mind that will help break barriers. Personally, I believe organized religions are also fundamentally flawed. I read somewhere that, “Ideas are better than beliefs. You can always change an idea, but it’s a lot harder to change a belief.”

~Anonymous

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education than the Classical ones, and it’s often said that we ought to learn other languages as a kind of painful political duty. There’s that, certainly, but there’s
Book Review: “The Spirit Catches you and you Fall Down” By Anne Fadiman

When Shamanism Confronts Biomedicine

“The Hmong have a phrase, "hais cuaj txub kaum txub," which means "to speak of all kinds of things." It is often used at the beginning of an oral narrative as a way of reminding the listeners that the world is full of things that may not seem to be connected but actually are; that no event occurs in isolation; that you can miss a lot by sticking to the point...”

“The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down” explores the true story of a cultural clash between American doctors practicing in a county hospital in California and a family of Hmong refugees. The family involved is one of 150,000 Hmong who fled Laos when their country fell to communist forces in 1975. They don't speak a word of English and their cultural values are so different from our own that understanding one another goes far beyond a good translator. What is especially required is what the author calls a "cultural broker".

The Lees are a traditional Hmong family that practices traditional shamanistic rituals. The culture clash begins when their daughter, Lia, starts having epileptic seizures. Epilepsy is a well-known illness to the Hmong but, unlike here in the West, they don't really see it as a debilitating condition. In fact, they regard it as a blessing. Traditionally, Hmong epileptics have grown up to be shamans. Seizures are seen as communication with the spirit world. Hence the English translation of epilepsy from Hmong is "the spirit catches you and you fall down." Seizures are evidence that one has a gift to perceive things other people cannot.

This conception of the illness could not be further from that of Western biomedicine. Upon the several occasions when Lia is admitted to the county hospital, there is a constant struggle for understanding between Lia's parents and her doctors. A translator often proved to be useless as there are no words in the Hmong vocabulary for "grand mal seizure" or "brain damage." The communication barrier went beyond language. Ultimately, what can be learned from this book is that cultural tolerance, understanding and exchange are key to effective communication among all individuals, regardless of the languages spoken.

Fadiman gives an even-handed account of a difficult situation. The reader is consistently informed and sensitized to Hmong history, culture and religious beliefs which ultimately challenge the world of biomedicine. This being the case, she makes sure not to discredit the doctors' abilities even in their most culturally insensitive moments. Also, the fact that this academic work is written in novel form not only makes it more engaging but also more accessible to a larger audience. This book proves itself to be an important and valuable account of cross-cultural communication within the context of Western medicine.

-Laura Gallo

It's a Small World After All?

This summer I had some of the most profound cultural experiences of my life. Where, might you ask, did I receive these amazing experiences? Why, at the happiest place on Earth: Walt Disney World. I sense your eyebrow is rising in doubt. How can such a blatantly commercialized institution give anyone a cultural experience? My answer is, very easily. This summer I had the privilege of working at "outdoor foods" as a vendor and hot-dog filler. But I think this summer taught me more about people than about cooking the perfect New-York style hotdog.

People come to Walt Disney World from all over the world expecting to be immersed in a world of magic and entertainment. As an observer, I could see the worries of the world lifted off the guests' shoulders as they walked around the park in pursuit of the shortest lines. I saw children playing together without any thought of who they are, where they come from, or what walk of life they follow. All that mattered was that they could play, and the best part was that Mickey Mouse was only a few blocks away! Parents allowed their kids free rein to interact with all sorts of people, without the usual suspicions that accompany us in our daily lives. How many of us walk down the street frowning so as not to get approached by strangers? Walt Disney World is blissfully removed from this world of individualism and distrust. Once a child ran up to me thinking I was his mother. When he looked up at me and realized his mistake, his parents, who in there was no malice, glance as to why their to my leg. Just smiles. is the secret to the Disney World.

times throughout my mer I wondered what be if it were like Walt Disney World. Children of all races and religions playing together in a truly ethnically blind society. Suspicion and hate giving way to joy and Winnie the Pooh plush toys. Disney allows each of us to revisit our childhood and to have fun without derision. I am a firm believer in the presence of a universal language of love, compassion, and acceptance (not because I am an idealist, but because I have seen this language in action in the "place where dreams come true"). And if you don't believe me, please go to the local video store and take out Peter Pan and listen to what good ol' Jimmy Cricket has to say!

I look at my life now and I feel the pessimism of the world around me. I find myself yearning for the joy I felt at Disney. I yearn for the acceptance, the optimism, the community, the harmony, and the laughs that I enjoyed in sunny green Florida. So now that midterms are done and essays are turned in, what will I do next? I'm going to Disney World!

Janka Dowding is in UI English Lit and History. When not studying, she spends her time reliving her childhood by writing children's fiction and folktales in Sunny Florida.

"Proselytizing should be deemed a form of hate speech and a form of intellectual holy war against fellow humans." A Hindu View from Rajiv Malhotra of the Infinity Foundation.

also the fact that all our mental processes connected with words tend to follow the structure of the language we’re thinking in... (T)he humanists have always insisted
In the Wake of Analytic Philosophy

I sit here wondering how belief in God persists in minds influenced by linguistic and logical analysis and it is worth noticing that the schism is mostly an academic problem. In practice, you either believe in God or do not. The destruction of the classical arguments for the existence of God does not pose a problem for my belief here and now—only its rational justification. Belief or disbelief comes first. Arguments come later.

Maybe the most logical position is agnosticism, but even Hume (the Scottish sceptic) had to set philosophy aside for a game of pool now and then and to believe that his favourite sandwich would not poison him this time. Analysis taken to the extreme is madness. There is simply nothing left when experience is analysed into individual perceptions. Sure, this patch of green is green, but that doesn’t actually say very much.

The classical arguments for the existence of God are accused of being linguistic fallacies, tricks of speech based on logical fallacies. The cosmological argument equivocates, the ontological argument evaporates with the analysis of incomplete symbols, and the teleological argument is made impotent by the role assigned to arguments by analogy. Where does this leave us? How are we to think about the Divine against the accusation of linguistic trickery?

It might help to see that analytic philosophy also plays with words. One cannot be an analytic philosopher without being a stickler for words. Bertrand Russell’s analysis of descriptions is, for instance, an attempt to analyse away the being of entities described by treating them as only relationships among propositional components. When God is defined as “the greatest being that can be thought” the subject talked about (God) is seen as a specification on any hypothetical X that could satisfy the conditions of the description. No real entity is talked about. This analysis of names and descriptions stems from the realization that we can talk about “things” that do not exist. We can talk about purple elks, but is that what we are doing when we talk about God?

“The greatest being that can be thought” does not refer to any X that could stand in such and such propositions. It is about an existing X that we would not even want to treat as a variable. The logic is convincing, but is it rationally satisfying? No. The mind recoils in horror at the prospect of being reduced to fragmentary perceptions and no real entities. Granted this analytic logic, is it rational to be strictly logical? What would Dr. Spock say about this? He would no doubt say that reason without logic is impossible; that “non-logical reasoning” is a contradiction of terms.

Is thought about God logical and reasonable? The answer is that it is as logical and reasonable as thinking about anything else. At most, the rejection of the ontological argument proves that the subject talked about (God) is not privileged with respect to its existence. God may exist, but does not necessarily exist. Well, this is the same position that I hold with respect to the page this article is written on. It may not exist, but it would be irrational to say that it does not. The strongest position is agnosticism with respect to any being. It is safer to reserve judgement, but to always do so is to confuse a method of finding the truth with the truth itself. In the wake of modernity, the old arguments have fallen and the stage is set for a constant attack on thought about God as nonsense. There is one simple answer to the hard-headed agnostic—at least my nonsense makes sense!

~Russell Hartt

Peeling Off Sticky Labels

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me."

That chant is probably one of the least true things I was taught as a child. Words - language in general - can be used very hurtfully, and labels are chief in the category of painful things. A misapplied or misunderstood label is difficult indeed. As a Christian, I am very aware that my religion has over the centuries hurt people in various ways, sometimes in precisely the same manner as a school yard bully (though on a different scale) - taunts and insults hurled at those who did nothing to invite them. Although these are not things that I did myself, I bear some responsibility for them the moment I chose to identify as part of that tradition. Thus, I find myself being almost overly conscious of my language - both verbal and physical - and wary of compounding the injuries of the past.

Verbally, I am aware of the power of words and of groups. By identifying as “Christian”, I claim membership in a group. I often find myself metaphorically looking over my shoulder, wondering where the boundaries to this group lie, and what behaviour I associate myself with by being a part of this group. A hope of mine is that I can make the label a part of me, rather than needing to make myself part of the label, removing some of the sting and memories of pain that word carries.

Similarly, my appearance/body language claims me as a member of a group, by virtue of the necklace I wear. Although I wear it for myself, it is part of the image I project. Neither do I want to cause people to feel unsafe around me, nor do I want to compromise who I am. Again, I hope that the connotations of the labels I use can be modified - even slightly - by the use I make of them.

Language is powerful in its deceivingly simple appearance. A word is just a series of sounds - they can be recorded, analyzed, measured. The tricky part is the meaning. Connotations are slippery things, and our reactions to words can be unexpectedly intense. A well-chosen insult cuts deep.

~The author is a US Linguistics student with a minor in Math. She identifies as Anglican, and attends St. Martha’s.*

that you don’t learn to think wholly from one language: you learn to think better from linguistic conflict, from bouncing one language off another. ~ Northrop Frye in The Educated Imagination
The Muslim Students Association of McGill is pleased to announce that Muslim students at McGill can perform their five daily prayers in the prayer room located at Peterson Hall (5460 McTavish Street), Rm 14. Visitors from other faiths are always welcome.

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