

2000 MAASA Presidential Address

A Question of Audience: Academic Double Talk

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The “double talk” in my title does not refer to statements made by your president or provost or dean, telling you to hold your program’s bottom line—*again*, while they also press to increase your faculty’s “productivity,” and then apologize—or not—for the paucity of your annual salary increase. Nor does the title aim to carry out a commentary on the contradiction between what universities *tell* the public about the value they place on good teaching and how those same institutions fail to support those claims with optimal class sizes and excellent salaries for excellent teachers. Either of these would be good subjects for my talk this afternoon. Instead, I want to discuss what I’m calling academic multilingualism, which would lead toward an intellectual cosmopolitanism and discourage disciplinary provincialism. My hope is that such double talking could also help our profession to recover public esteem.

I want to elaborate this idea of academic multilingualism as a way to speak about our responsibility as academics, and especially as academics committed to American studies. American studies, after all, is by its very nature multi- or cross-disciplinary. By its nature it demands our competence in several disciplinary languages. American studies should be, then, the most cosmopolitan of disciplines. American studies ought to be a model for multilingual academic discourse.

The academic cosmopolitanism I am aiming for would help us map our own ways of thinking over a topography made up of the points of view of others in our discipline. The discussion that would emerge from such a mapping of our or any discipline would encourage us to think about and learn from that mapping process, without necessarily committing any one person to any single perspective, disciplinary location, or its home language. In the course of that conceptual conversation between ways to think about and describe our subjects, there is a good chance that any of us might change for the better.

In *The Signifying Monkey* Henry Louis Gates, Jr., famously outlined one kind of double talking, which he argued African Americans have used for centuries. The double talking Gates represents entails the adoption of the oppressor's language by the oppressed. But for Gates, the oppressed not only use but also subvert the oppressor's language. In that subversion, the meaning of a word becomes "double-voiced." The double voicing depends fundamentally on the word's mainstream meaning. But the function of that meaning is to set up the meaning of the black vernacular by its difference from it, thus undercutting the mainstream meaning through connotations evident to the vernacular community. As Gates writes, "The language of blackness encodes and names its sense of independence through a rhetorical process that we might think of as the Signifyin(g) black difference" (66). This double-voiced language of blackness does not aim to communicate across the boundaries of discourse communities. Instead, its purpose is to solidify its own community. But because I am looking for a way for us to move more easily between communities, Gates's double talk is not a rhetorical concept I find useful.

Using the language of the colonizer, colonized people also may engage in double talk. The Irish use of English is a case in point. As in Gates's outline of signifyin', so the colonized person's use of the colonizer's language may involve mastery through difference and subversion. Eamonn Wall describes the Irish use of English as having produced "a hybrid language" which, in turn, accounts for Ireland's "subversive literature" (19). Or, as Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, "mimicry disrupts colonial authority" (88). But in the case of the colonized, in contrast to Gates's understanding of the Signifyin(g) black difference, subversion may not satisfy. Wall points out that "The poet John Montague, taking stock of the fact that history has deprived the Irish of their language, refers to English, which he employs in his work, as 'a grafted tongue,' through which experience and feeling emerge uncomfortably" (19). Drawing power and meaning from the violence, unnaturalness, and ultimate perversity of the grafting metaphor, Montague thus writes, . . . To grow/a second tongue, as/harsh a humiliation/as twice to be born" (quoted in Wall, 19). In addition to paralleling some of Gates's explanation of African American signifyin', Wall explains that a consequence of that forced use of language and the necessary subversion of that language is an "attitude." Wall explains that attitude as "an edge to a person which indicates an undefined degree of dissatisfaction; if you know teenagers, you know what I mean" (3-4).

What I am asking for, on the other hand, is for a way to avoid our remaining or becoming teenagers, so to speak. Our double talking need not be grafted. It may be adopted. It need not produce that attitude. It may help us both to extend our community and to strengthen the bonds of that new community. The point is neither to subvert nor master the language of the other group. Nor is the point to represent one's intellectual (or political or cultural) identity solely through one's speech at any given moment. After all, I don't represent my Frenchness when I speak French, my Greekness when I speak Greek, or my Italianness when I speak Italian. So why should the language of the academic traditionalist, for example, mark me as one? Why should the language of the cultural materialist, say, mark me as one? Why should the historian's or literary theorist's language alone mark me as one? Just as the ability to speak and be understood in more than one language enables one to live in a more cosmopolitan way, so would the ability to speak more than one academic language enable one to live a more cosmopolitan professional existence.

In an 1888 letter Henry James wrote of the "melting together" of English and American cultures to such a degree that he could speak of "the life of the two countries as continuous or more or less convertible, or at any rate as simply different chapters of the same general subject." Moreover, James wrote that he wished to represent himself as a fiction writer "in such a way that it would be impossible to an outsider to say whether I am, at a given moment, an American writing about England or an Englishman writing about America . . . and so far from being ashamed of such an ambiguity I should be exceedingly proud of it, for it would be highly civilized" (244). James's idea of assimilation, difference, identity, and civilization was like that of Amy Levy, an Anglo-Jewish writer and James's contemporary, who argued strongly that Jews in fiction ought to be "thoroughly English although singular in many ways" (Hunt 236). Like James, Amy Levy saw an essential place in life and in fiction for citizens with hyphenated, cosmopolitan identities, who lived and thus spoke as cultural natives, but who also preserved differences from the dominant culture in order to define and maintain their particular identities.

James's and Levy's comments dramatize the complex relationship of language and identity. When in the letter I excerpted James explains that "I aspire to write in such a way that it would be impossible to an outsider to say whether I am, at a given moment, an American writing about England or an Englishman writing about America," he spotlights the significance of language in terms of self-presentation, assimilation, community, and identity. It is important to remember that James only wants to *appear* or *perform* and be *accepted* as both English and American. He never expresses in the letter a desire to reject his American identity and to adopt an English one. Thus cosmopolitan describes best James's attitude. James's cosmopolitanism never implies that appearing English requires a rejection of his core identity as an American. James places a premium on his ability to control through a non-threatening public performance

with language *how* others perceive him. At the same time, he maintains through that control his sense of himself as an individual. Thus, James's ability to choose when to conform to a given culture, to decide when and how to "melt" into it, also is a marker of his difference from it. For only by seeing himself as an outsider to a new culture could he make the changes necessary to perform as if he were an insider. His performance would depend, then, on his ability to double talk.

The point to make here is that the languages I'm talking about constitute the ways we speak about our discipline, the ways we organize our thinking about our discipline, the ways we examine American studies, and, consequently, the ways in which we organize and identify ourselves. If we can learn to speak the language of another discipline—or learn the language used by another part of our own discipline, we can both understand and be understood by that other. It's a matter not of encouraging diversity, but of respecting difference. Like James and Amy Levy, each of us may help construct a strong cosmopolitan academic community with others outside our native disciplines, as it were. We could choose as we see fit when to assimilate and when to return home. Language thus enables performance.

About ten years ago at the Modern Language Association meeting, I attended a session at which one of the presenters offered a theoretically dense paper. The paper was warmly received by the thirty or so people at the session. Following the session, I heard this exchange between a member of the audience, who appeared to be in her sixties, and the presenter, who appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties: audience member: "That was a wonderful talk. But now I'll have to go back to my room and look up half of the paper in my *Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*." Presenter, archly: "Only half?" What struck me then about the exchange and what I want to highlight now is that neither the presenter nor her auditor really wanted to understand or be understood by the other. Moreover, the language used in the exchange suggests that each was pleased to make her resistance public and to produce a public standoff that represented their ideological and thus linguistic impasse. Even more, each was pleased by the confrontation, which, one imagines, only served to confirm their identities and harden their attitudes. Each relied on language to conduct the performance. But the performance did nothing to bridge a disciplinary, and, perhaps, generational rift. Instead, it widened and deepened it.

The divisions that surfaced following Janet Radway's 1998 American Studies Association presidential address, and were the subject of an excellent session at last year's MAASA meeting, were products of a lack of academic double talking and a commitment to a monolingualism like that which I saw at the MLA. Imprisoned within the identities dictated by disciplinary languages, neither the Radwayans nor their opponents could understand the other. Lacking a common language or a knowledge of the other's language, neither could nor would listen to the other. And with each side having invested their identity in

their disciplinary community and its language, neither side seemed ready to extend the boundaries of those identities to speak with and listen to the other and, in the process, to risk any change that could come about through that migration across linguistic and disciplinary and identity boundaries.

A recent discussion on the internet's H-Amstdy is relevant here because it grew out of a question from someone who lives outside the United States and for whom English is probably not a first language. Thus the larger issues of language, identity, and double talking come into play in at least four ways: first, literally; second, metaphorically; third, in terms of the American cultural construction of meaning; and fourth, in terms of the discipline-specific meaning of the terms "race" and "slave."

The thread began with a question from a Finnish list member who wanted to know whether the term "race" was politically incorrect and whether "phenotype" was now the preferred term. Thus the issue of American English and its specific meaning was first evident. The Finnish scholar simply sought to learn our language. In so learning our language, he sought to learn something about our culture. Ironically, he probably learned about both—though not in the way his question implied. The replies to the race/phenotype post function as a metaphor for the problems of academic monolingualism and attitude. But they also show the possibilities double talking holds for *solving* those problems.

The first posted response was from Madeline Carr from the history department at Florida State University, who wrote:

If the terms [race and slave] are politically incorrect, then all the African Americans, and other types here in Florida are still out in never-never land. No one uses phenotype, we all refer to the slaves and slavery, and we talk about race all the time. And we're still around in the world of history. Whether the English departments feel differently is another matter. How would one use phenotype in a statistical enumeration? I.e., there are 6,000 phenotypes (are they human?)—Good luck.

Subsequent posts, of course, agreed and disagreed with the use of phenotype and race. Some, like Carr's, exhibited attitude at the prospect that their language would not be accepted. But the reason Carr's post is significant here is because it resists the term phenotype on a fundamental level of disciplinary and personal identity. Thus it is worth talking about as an example of academic monolingualism. Carr's fundamental resistance to phenotype depended on her rhetorical identification with region, common-sense, consensus, and opposition to the community she constructs as "the English departments." The resistance is fundamental because Carr represented it through a series of generalizations ("all the African Americans, and other types here in Florida," "No one uses phenotype"). These remarkable generalizations serve to preserve the solidarity of the

“we,” as in “we all talk about slaves and slavery and we all talk about race all the time.” But in denying the legitimacy—or even the existence—of another language, Carr’s post also prevents communication with anyone using another language. After all, for her they don’t exist.

It is an obvious point to say that all language is or can be theorized. That is, all language, including our own and that which we H-Amsters see on our e-lists, can be rationalized and understood. Likewise, all disciplinary language has a rhetoric in which we can locate and understand an ideological grammar that can be, with some effort, learned. That disciplinary language need not be incorporated into our identities as individuals or professionals any more than learning a new language or understanding a new terminology. But to achieve such learning, there must be an end to the notion that there is a best language which must be adopted by, or grafted onto, anyone who wants to be part of “us,” who wants to be, therefore, someone.

Once we can accept the legitimacy of the range of disciplinary languages and gain a range of competencies in them, we will be able to speak to each other without an attitude. We will be able to listen to each other, find interest in each others’ work, criticize each others’ work with competence and confidence, and take an active interest in the work that grounds intellectual positions different from our own—whether we work in a history or English or any other department. Once we stop devouring each other, we can turn our attention to those outside our academic departments who would devour us.

Looking outside academic departments brings me to a second problem, which in the long run may be more important than how we learn to speak and listen to each other: that is, how we are heard and understood by non-specialists.

There is a move now in higher education to press humanities and social sciences faculty to prove their worth by generating revenue through grants, awards, corporate partnerships, and the like. Clearly, this model for increasing the university’s top line comes from the sciences. And with indirect cost calculations—overhead—running perhaps from forty to one hundred cents for every project dollar and going directly to the university, it is clear why administrators who care little for our language, as it were, are now, in varying degrees, pressing non-science faculty to conduct their academic lives as if they were scientists running labs. When framed as a job requirement, success at university fundraising would not necessarily entail recognition of the particular faculty member. After all, it would be “part of the job.”

There are at least two problems with this new performance expectation. Both are related to our inability to speak bilingually. First, it presumes that humanities and social science faculty are not doing enough already. It presumes that whatever we are doing in terms of teaching, scholarship, and service is not enough. Moreover, it presumes that we have time to spare from our current duties to take as part of our routines the writing of grant proposals and search for extramural funding. In short, it presumes that we are not already working hard enough and ought to do more to contribute to the institution’s cash flow. This

presumption is redolent of the kind of thinking that Constance A. Sullivan tells us drove the recent tensions at the University of Minnesota. Thus she wrote:

With the regents' insistence on changes to the faculty tenure code. . . , Minnesota entered into a dramatic face-off between corporate culture and the culture of universities. The rhetoric of the attack on the faculty was hot: faculty members with tenure were not only lazy, incompetent, self-indulgent, unaccountable, and unproductive, they were selfishly opposed to the mere idea of change. (87)

The face-off Sullivan describes between cultures is also a disjunction between languages. Neither side could talk to the other in Sullivan's scenario because neither sought to understand or be understood by the other.

The second problem with imposing revenue generation as an element of academic performance is that it assumes that there is money to be granted. Clearly, the amount of federal and private funding for the humanities and social sciences in comparison to the hard sciences and, say, business, is small. To presume that they are anywhere near comparable is a mistake. But here too, the problem is as much our own as it is any administrator's because we fail to learn a language that could represent us to an administrator.

Yet it's not only administrators who think that we are lazy or what we are doing is not productive enough because they don't know us and cannot really think clearly about us. The public at-large doesn't know what we do—or earn. It's a source of wonder (at my stupidity? my lack of common sense?) to family friends and relatives that at what is touted as “The Number One Comprehensive University in the Midwest” I earn less as an associate professor with nine years of service than many high school teachers. It's a surprise to them that my job costs me more than the nine hours each week I spend in the classroom. They don't quite believe that I don't “have the summer off,” but must use that time to read, write, and work toward publication, which is a requirement of my job and the basis of up to fifty percent of my annual review. My urge is to confront these people and demand that they tell me why they don't know what I (we) do. But I really cannot ask that question because the problem is not theirs. It's mine and ours. The problem is ours because those outside our profession are under no necessary obligation to learn the language of what we do. But we bear a heavy burden to learn to speak to them, if we want to be understood. And while it's clear that they don't need us, we certainly need them—especially if we work at public institutions. Of course, I could simply leave things as they are and carry on with my “attitude,” hoping that the world were different and waiting for the day when everyone, at last, “would understand me.”

We must speak at least three languages: one of our particular discipline, one of another discipline, and one to the rest of the universe. I've known this was true ever since my uncle, who is a terrific guy, asked me, trying sincerely to

speaking my language, “If Shakespeare is so great, why don’t they translate him into English?” Or one of my friends from high school, who, again, like my uncle, tried to meet me on the field of my own language, when he wondered what sense it makes to educate teachers, who, after all, he said, are the ones who ought themselves to be teaching. It was my problem that I could not find the language to answer either my uncle or my high school friend. And it would not have helped my (our) situation to tell them that they are both idiots and shouldn’t venture into our deep scholarly waters. It would not have helped because the kinds of questions they brought are carried by our own administrators, some of whom have not been in a classroom in a decade or more, who read very little, publish even less, and are being hired and evaluated in terms not of the scholarly world but of the corporate one. Like those friends, acquaintances, neighbors, and family members who do not have the first idea of what we do—and therefore do not have the language to think about what we do—so do we need a language to speak to many of our superiors and to those outside our profession, who think that we are lazy or unproductive or self-indulgent. (How we deal with those of us who are lazy, unproductive, or self-indulgent itself demands another language.)

More important, that we have a difficult time speaking with our language to those outside our communities, especially when they are employed by the same institutions which employ us, makes me realize that our language, the language of our disciplines, has been taken from us. As the nature of the academic world changes (and that change is marked clearly by Michael Bérubé’s satirical “A Shakespeare Department and Other Business Ideas for Colleges Everywhere,” in the January 28, 2000, *Chronicle of Higher Education*), we find ourselves in a foreign land where the language is no longer our own—if in fact it ever was! We need to accept, if we have not already, that we need to learn new languages to survive. When the NEH seems to sponsor more and more television air time and fewer and fewer of the scholarly projects that ought to inform those television shows—or is it my imagination?—and to make oneself attractive to a potential employer or valuable to a current one, one must show the ability to raise money not only to teach well, be a good colleague, and advance one’s discipline, it’s time to learn the language of those who would control our professional futures.

What’s at issue in each of the problems I’ve raised is language and identity. Within American studies, factions resist learning the language of other factions because they believe on some level they shouldn’t have to; that their language is the correct one, is adequate, is even preferable to others. To abandon that language even for a single conversation is to abandon their identities. Carr’s post to H-Amstdy shows this point well. Identity grounded in and represented by language explains why the MLA presenter was so gleeful that her talk was impenetrable to her auditor. Let that auditor go to her reference book to learn the presenter’s language. Let her *learn something*, for God’s sake. That’s also why I could not or would not answer my uncle and my friend. Why should I? Let them

figure out their problem with Elizabethan English and pedagogy. And that's why each side in what we called last year at the MAASA Conference "the Seattle debate" finds it more comfortable to attack the other rather than speak and listen to it.

The problem also can be understood in terms of parochialism as much as in terms of cosmopolitanism. Like the person who never leaves the neighborhood or small town and is therefore convinced that there could be no more interesting place on earth, we too become ghettoized, so to speak, in our own offices, departments, and disciplines. Like the pilgrims in Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad*, we compare everything—unfavorably—to our own situation, which, out of ignorance to everything else and out of the way we conceive our own identities, we idealize.

Another issue that complicates this discussion—but at the same time suggests the cosmopolitan imperative—has to do with the question of precise language and jargon. It seems to me that one difference between precise language and "jargon" is whether that language belongs to you or to someone else. Here too the difference is a question of audience. My precise language is someone else's jargon.

Technical language or jargon is a precise way of conveying information both in terms of connotations and denotations. This is obvious and should not require an example. So why the fuss about jargon? The fuss arises because the use of technical language with someone who does not know the language may end up separating speaker from audience—as in my MLA meeting example earlier—rather than bringing speaker and audience together. Frederick Douglass noted some time ago the power of jargon to communicate specialized meanings to specific groups—and also to exclude others from that meaning—when he wrote that

[the slaves] would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. . . . [T]hey would sing, as a chorus, words which to many seem *unmeaning jargon*, but which, nevertheless, were *full of meaning* to themselves.
(quoted in Gates, 67)

In so separating ourselves from the many, jargon expresses an attitude, it becomes exclusive and off-putting when used in front of the wrong group. It can be deadly isolating when used with, say, a rhetorical gesture like "of course," as in "of course, you've followed the recent debate over phenotypes." It is true that translating a specialized language into a less specialized one sacrifices meaning. That sacrifice is in the nature of translation. But it's also true that through translation much meaning can be conveyed. Ngugi wa Thiong'o reminds those of us who resist such translation that translation's power may be understood best by the example of the Bible, which, he said, "was not first written in English."

Without the translation, though, resistances are encouraged and communication is frustrated.

American studies can be, ought to be, a model for intellectual cosmopolitanism. We ought to lead the way in academic double talking. Like Walter Benjamin's urban observer, the *flâneur*, we should look and listen closely to what is obvious and not so obvious around us. Wrote Benjamin:

. . . the perfected art of the *flâneur* includes a knowledge of "dwelling." The primal image of "dwelling," however, is a matrix or shell—that is, the thing which enables us to read off the exact figure of whatever lives inside it. Now, if we recollect that not only people and animals but also spirits and above all images can inhabit a place, then we have a tangible idea of what concerns the *flâneur* and of what he looks for. (264)

Just as Benjamin articulates a vision for looking and listening and thinking carefully, and in so doing seeks the not-so-obvious from the evident, so Homi Bhabha challenges his readers to see what is invisible (47). In that seeing, Bhabha locates the potential for developing hybrid and cosmopolitan languages, identities, perspectives. Such hybridity treasures difference because in accepting and embracing difference is the possibility that boundaries that had seemed uncrossable will become open and unguarded. If we can suspend the relation of our language to our identities—as we would travelling in a place where English is not the first language, we would find that disciplines and communities which seemed impenetrable might be opened. And in that new process of seeing, listening, and communicating, we too may change. We may find greater respect for those who speak other languages because in knowing that language, we will come to know them and will have become a little more like them, without, necessarily, as Henry James and Amy Levy pointed out at the turn of the last century, giving up our own core identities or values or beliefs.

And while Bhabha argues that that place for the creation of the hybrid identity is in writing, I want to argue that listening, like reading, also opens a space between the identities of the speaker and auditor for the possibility of communication and community rather than division and isolation. As Bhabha writes:

If you seek simply the sententious or the exegetical, you will not grasp the hybrid moment outside the sentence—not quite experience, not yet concept; part dream, part analysis; neither signifier nor signified. This intermediate space between theory and practice disrupts the disciplinary semiological demand to enumerate all the languages within earshot. (181)

Yet I am not the only one calling for such double talk. And it comforts me to know that on this issue I am not the only dreamer. In *A Brief History of Time*, that

marvelous personal romance, that perfection of cosmopolitan double talk, Stephen Hawking writes that he looks to the day when all people, "not just a few scientists," can discuss the universe (175).

One of the great advantages of having the privilege to speak to you today is that like Hawking, I too can spin a personal romance. And the idea that we can find a way to speak with each other, both on and off each other's ground, about issues that matter to us and that may matter to others without the acrimony, conceit, and discipline-centered chauvinism and tension that usually characterize such interchanges is the foundation of that romance.

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