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Why Language Matters (Even More Than Ever Before)...

Reflections on Paola Giorgis,
*Foreign Languages and Foreign Language Education
as Critical and Intercultural Experiences*

Victoria Perselli

For me, the key theme and most important take-away from this book—which the author, who is a teacher, researcher, and political activist in Northern Italy, has structured under thematic headings of *Praxis*, *Theory*, and *Research* in order to delineate her understanding of ‘foreignness’ in all its multiplicity of meanings—comes at the very end, where she describes education as ‘the militant and applied branch of knowledge.’

In her project, speaking overall, this is certainly how education is being put to work: Giorgis is a wide-reaching scholar who has, it seems to me, an extraordinary command of the kinds of theoretical, cultural and artistic referents that support her central tenet of foreignness—and by extension foreign language teaching—as being significant vehicles in the struggle (using a quote from Lorenzo Milani) ‘to communicate with all kinds of people, meet new folks and new problems, and laugh at the sacred borders of all fatherlands’ (pp.103-104).

This latter is the kind of phrase many writers and/or workers in the field of language education may wish to have written themselves, and one that we could

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all surely joyfully espouse, especially when conjoined with Giorgis' embracing of foreignness as a positive, rather than a problem or an exoticisation of 'the other'?

Except, of course, that education in these difficult times often occurs within a political landscape that all too frequently manifests the polar opposite position, that is, one of homogenising, sorting, grading, constraining and even restraining the human species from meaningful, affective interactions of any kind; where mythological sacred borders and fatherlands are apologies for the true-life drawing and redrawing of hard boundaries and positivistic identity categorise so beloved of empire and empire builders. This is the bleak reality of life for a majority of people artificially separated and subdivided from their geographical roots, from each other and from the material and economic sources of well-being that would enable such an elegant educational purpose to flourish. The icons to contemporary demagogues and the divisions they created may have been smashed in both tangible and symbolic acts of overcoming oppression in the 20th century on the one hand, only to be replaced or reconstituted in the current age on the other—including the addition—and largely unanticipated—*virtual reality* of cyberspace and social media as much as in oppression's material manifestations of clip-boards, cages, tagged ankles and electrified perimeter fences.

Throughout her book, and especially in the beginning and end sections, Giorgis painstakingly unpicks the populist ideals (speech acts) that abound across the globe, currently, which serve to cumulatively undermine 'education as the militant branch of knowledge,' so that by the end this reader is in no doubt regarding the authority of Giorgis' thesis.

Using her own country of Italy as a specific example, the author demonstrates how nationality and national identities are continuously being constructed, disassembled and remade through language. Giorgis is emphatic also regarding the illusory nature of the many signs and symbols that constitute the alt-right's reclamation of culture presently (ubiquitously short-handed as 'culture wars' in the popular press, as though such hate-speech has no *material* effects) and it is truly heart-warming to see how her language teaching praxis has unfolded against this somewhat bleak—and possibly dystopian—backdrop (depending, I guess, on just how depressed one might feel about the political landscape currently in Italy and beyond).

Giorgis herself remains predominantly upbeat—and for good reason: she has identified and operationalised an armoury of specific research strategies and tools, all the more powerfully with which to argue her case for a liberalising form of language education today. This has the dual purpose of being enormously helpful for research students in Higher Education; demonstrating in clear and rational terms how a methodological framework for constructing, conducting and analysing educational research can—and I would say *must*—emerge from the theoretically informed, politically overt stance of the researcher. Anything else is mere dogma. But for the novice researcher this always begs the enormously daunting question—where to begin?

In this instance, the (theoretical) armoury-for-action is centred, as one would expect, on the identification and analysis of the key terms of Georgis' daily work as a foreign language teacher—but via an imaginative and bold literary trawl that conjoins Kristeva, Kramersch and Jonathan Swift (on Foreign); Klemperer, Stieve and Orwell (on Language); Meirieu, Freire and Milani (on Education) and so forth. Indeed, Georgis repeatedly intertwines her literary scholarship with the elemental aspects of all our daily lives, whether these be food, TV and media, clothing or skin tones; for example for the purpose of demonstrating how stereotyping (of a nationality or ethnicity) occurs and how the attribution of such stereotyping can all too easily be attributed to 'cultural differences' rather than as a feature of an individual's behaviour—over which they themselves have degrees of autonomy. Neither does she shy away from difficult topics: migration, asylum, poverty; indeed socio-economic status is a particular concern.

This is entirely coherent with the critical pedagogic approach in educational research (and Participatory Action Research as Georgis' explicit research methodology), since at no point do critical pedagogues seek to *screen out* the variables of art, culture, politics and economics from the research project design, or of experience grounded in the conversational and affective dimensions of teaching and learning, because it is precisely through these that we aspire to hold true to the interests and aspirations of the learner—their world of lived experience—as research 'subject.'

The middle section of *Meeting Foreignness* constitutes a practical account of Georgis' formal research project and its analysis. This chapter is entirely consistent with her writing practice of seamlessly interweaving theory with praxis, in this instance according to the responses of her research participants. As I anticipated, there are illustrations here of the linguistic turns one would expect to encounter when doing research in and on lived experience: 'reflexivity' and 'triangulation,' for example, that Georgis nicely demystifies via their practical application in the in-depth analysis of the data and discussion of her findings.

So why *does* all of this matter? And—most dreaded of questions for qualitative researchers of all stripes: *Who cares anyway?*

Consistent with Paola Georgis' own approach, and drawing direct inspiration from it, I will bring into play two items of realia from my practice as a reader and writer that illustrate my own thoughts on identity, language(s) and foreignness, specifically...

1. A playground chant from childhood, that at one time would have been perceived as completely innocuous:

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

It is now unfortunately self-evident that this cannot be further from the truth, as the hate-speech, not just of lonely individuals or 'playground' (and of course cyberspace) bullies, but also of world leaders on a global stage, continuously con-

tributes to legitimate acts of physical violence, mental and material terror; in Giorgis, from Giuliano Pontara, violence that is ‘direct, structural and cultural’ (p.103).

2. *Never Let Me Go*, by Kazuo Ishiguro, a novel written by this Nobel prize-winning author from 2005 that demonstrates with devastating clarity how human beings can be homogenised, institutionalised and brainwashed *through language*. Ishiguro employs a flat, two-dimensional prose and banal narrative style—as expressed through the first-person voice of the novel’s protagonist—combined with an educational setting—‘Hailsham’—where the central characters are deliberately deprived of knowledge of otherness, difference, *foreignness*, in Giorgis, that might motivate their escape and set them free. Ishiguro shows how language—and language alone; there is no overt physical violence at Hailsham—functions to instigate material constraints and, specifically, psychological blockages—*taboo*—the very title of this journal—without any need for hard borders. The characters in this novel know that they cannot ask particular questions relative to their identity and selfhood because... They just *know*. Instead, the young people at Hailsham fret and fuss over the most minuscule details of the mundane interactions amongst themselves and with their teachers. They have no relational reference points or language models beyond a reductive and proscribed curriculum; a monotheistic and reified version of ‘culture.’

Now juxtapose this with what Giorgis’ protagonists have to say about foreign language learning (italics added):

I sometimes use English to *break the banality of conversation... as a transgression* when I am with friends.

Indeed, another language *makes you feel a different person, and that can attain more self-confidence than in your mother-tongue.* (p. 70)

Giorgis’ students are encouraged to consider the phenomenon of the linguistic gaffe, for example, because ‘intercultural communication is not a practice we can learn from a list or from a book, as it involves complex dynamics which can have positive outcomes, or may result in a fiasco for many different reasons and causes. (To fail linguistically is) an opportunity to reconsider the context or situation from another perspective, to grasp at other meanings and, at the same time, to learn about ourselves too’ (p. 25).

It therefore concerns me deeply that the study of foreign languages has been persistently demoted in public schooling in English speaking countries, in particular, and I struggle not to see this as an educational homogenisation (colonization?) of the very same generations of young people who are visibly experimenting—and oftentimes struggling—with their identities alongside all the other insecurities of life in the 21st century. All human beings have the right to self-definition, in my view; to the making and remaking of identity and sense of self, whether stemming of necessity from instances of trauma and tragedy or from the more privileged

position of an imaginative and informed educational curriculum that challenges learners to consider critically who they are and who they hope to become; always already in relations with those around them. Having had the privilege of growing up in a language-rich environment (argumentative, explosive, linguistically competitive and at times unquestionably insensitive though that may have been) and having experienced the work of Orwell and the like in my formal education and beyond, it seems as though I have always known—at a visceral level even—how and why language—and languages—matter. From my reading of Paola Georgis I now understand—and can argue more cogently—why foreign language teaching and the meeting of foreignness through foreign languages is axiomatic to arriving at an understanding of self and others that constitutes meaningful maturity.

On a stylistic/aesthetic note, I would have preferred a more ‘elasticized’ version of *Meeting Foreignness*, as I felt at times that ideas came so thick and fast it was hard for me to keep up. I needed more time to think and digest, even when the sources and settings of Georgis’ discourse were familiar territory, broadly speaking. I look forward therefore to further explorations of her key themes because I believe that the issues Paola Georgis has raised are of enormous importance; next time her publisher just needs to allow her more wordage, is all.

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