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JULIE SEDIVY

# THE QUIET LIFE FORCE OF SUBMERGED LANGUAGES

*Turning to my mother tongue is a way of orienting to language*

**H**ere is one of my favourite writing exercises to assign to students: Reach as far back in time as you can and pull out one of your first memories about language. What do you remember about becoming a verbal creature? How did language figure in your budding consciousness? If language is one of the core properties that make us human, then your specific language experiences made you the human that you are. Write about *that*. Bring it into awareness and make it part of who you are as a writer.

One of my own earliest language memories is of my father preparing to read to me and my siblings. It's the preparation I remember, more than the reading itself: how he made eye contact with each of us in turn, how he opened the book slowly, licked his finger, found the first page. How his lips parted and a rush of new air filled his chest, and was held there for a moment, before the words came. This was ceremony, and a hush would settle over us.

I now realize that, more than just reading to us, my father was giving us lessons in how to quiet our bodies and set our minds to properly receive language. Years later, I thought of my father's lessons when I read the opening lines of the brilliant novel, *Too Loud a Solitude*, written by the Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal: "When I read, I don't really read; I pop a beautiful sentence into my mouth and suck it like a fruit drop, or I sip it like a liqueur until the thought dissolves in me like alcohol, infusing brain and heart and coursing on through the veins to the root of each blood vessel." These words felt exactly like the instructions my father had enacted with his gestures.

My father only ever read to us in Czech, but soon, English came to overwrite Czech in my mind. In fact, having left Czechoslovakia at the age of two, I have no linguistic memories in which my mother tongue was not already ceding brain space to another language. This slow transformation is a reality for many Canadians who are

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born into immigrant families or who leave the country of their birth as children. Their adopted language inevitably comes to displace the first language they learned to speak, the first language in which they were loved, the first language in which they were instructed in how to be a human. Even if they had once been fluent in their mother tongue, it is almost always the new language that comes to dominate. Typically, such children grow up to sound identical to those who were born into the mainstream language, at least to the outside observer.

I developed an early interest in writing, and as with the rest of my education, I thought I needed my writing to be indistinguishable from the writing of people who were born into the English language. I imitated the young adult books I read at the time, even though none of them contained characters or language that resonated with my deep memories. I felt proud of my mastery of the English language, and, when I landed in my first creative writing class in university, I thought I had absorbed the styles and conventions of the Canadian writers who were being lauded at the time. But I was an imposter. My pieces were failures. The only story my professor liked was one he said reminded him of Milan Kundera—a Czech author I had never heard of. Something of my early linguistic life had infused itself in my brain and heart after all, even though my Czech grammar was now in tatters.

My professor's comment prompted me to broaden my reading, and I found myself drawn to writers like Vladimir Nabokov, Aleksandar Hemon, and yes, Milan Kundera. It wasn't lost on me that these authors were Slavs who started off writing in their mother tongues, but were forced by the convulsions of history to continue their creative lives in a different language. Perhaps I felt an affinity for their personal histories, seeing in their self-translation a far grander version of my own. But I recognized something deeply familiar about the way they used language. They wrote in English (or French), but in ways that *did* resonate with some of my deepest memories. No austere minimalism here. They mixed irony with lavish sentimentalism, used gorgeous words to describe hideous events, interrupted their narratives with flights of introspection. For the first time, I was reading literature in a language that felt native to me. Reading these authors, in whose adopted languages I could detect traces of their Slavic selves, I understood that I could never succeed by imitating authors born into the English language.

Nabokov or Hemon, who reinvented themselves in a new language mid-stride, are often held up as aspirational success stories—look

at their linguistic agility, their ability to adapt! They are sources of inspiration to newcomers who dream of continuing their writing careers in a new language. Much less attention is paid to the challenges facing writers whose earliest, most formative experiences with language are long buried under the debris of a newer language. For them, the difficulty is not how to learn English well enough to write it, but how to connect with that innermost place in which language is most potent.

Some time ago, a person who was aware of my linguistic background contacted me about participating in a literary event for multilingual writers, but I did not qualify when I told her that English was the only language in which I'd ever published. This got me thinking about what makes a writer multilingual. From speaking to others, I learned that writers have many ways of tapping the submerged non-English parts of themselves and bringing these to the surface, even when the written product is in English. One person told me he edits his work in Afrikaans, this being the language in which he was trained to be analytical. Another told me that, for writing prose that is transactional and to the point, she can immediately start writing in English, but that to write with intellectual depth or emotional colour, she first has to write out snippets in Italian. Yet another said he uses Portuguese as a “second brain” notepad, because using this language can jostle ideas that are less available in English.

My own Czech language has eroded to where I would never dream of inflicting it upon readers. But it is still the language in which I mainline language pleasure—no doubt because of some of those early experiences of being the child of eloquent Czech-speaking, literature-loving parents. For me, turning to my mother tongue is a way of orienting to language in a certain way, of setting the mind properly and preparing for ceremony. When I struggle to write prose that not only informs but transcends, I take time to read a bit in Czech or listen to a Czech podcast. It reminds me of what it feels to sink deeply into language, to be jolted by the aptness of a word or the surprising twist of a phrase, to be delighted by arrangements of its sounds, and lulled by its rhythms. To have it dissolve in me like alcohol. ■

*Julie Sedivy is a Calgary-based language scientist, editor and writer of (mostly) nonfiction. Her most recent book, Memory Speaks, is a scientific memoir about losing and reclaiming a native tongue. She is at work on a book of essays to be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.*