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## **BIROn** - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

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Slaying the dragon of fanaticism through enlightenment. teaching languages and cultures in a post-9/11 world: an European perspective

### **Journal Article**

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Column entitled “Teaching Languages and Cultures in a Post-9/11 World: International Perspectives,” planned for the winter of 2004 in the *Modern Language Journal*.

When the planes struck the WTC towers on 9/11, I was preparing the hand-outs for the paper on communicative anxiety in multilinguals that I was to present the next day at the *Second International Conference on Trilingualism and Trilingual Education* in Leeuwarden, The Netherlands. I had an ear glued to the radio and sent emails to friends and colleagues in New York to find out whether they and their loved-ones were safe. It turned out that the partner of one very good friend had seen the people trapped in the WTC jumping to their death, that the son of another friend had been evacuated before the collapse of the building, that a former PhD student from Birkbeck College who is now Professor at Teachers College, Columbia University was safe but that her family was stuck around New York. Watching the news that evening, my daughter who was 5 at the time, observed that “someone must have thrown a lot of burning matches in there...”. It was clear that the event was going to affect us all. My first personal short-term worry was that of taking a plane to fly to the Netherlands on the following day. Despite a panicky atmosphere at Heathrow and Schiphol the journey went smoothly. The colleagues from the US didn’t make it to the conference as all flights were grounded. Those of us who did reach the beautiful Frisian town felt bewildered. We held a minute of silence before the first plenary address to honour the innocent victims of that act of blind terror. And then we talked a lot about what we as linguists and intercultural mediators could contribute to promote peaceful relations between various communities. We felt that through our teaching and our research we can contribute to the fight against ignorance, prejudice and fanaticism.

My colleagues and I in Leeuwarden also feared what the political consequences of 9/11 might be. And recent history has unfortunately confirmed our worst fears. Of course acts of terror must be prevented, and I personally agreed that those responsible for 9/11 had to be punished. The rooting out of Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan seemed justified. What took me, and many Europeans by surprise was the decision of the US government to strike Iraq, and to do so without backing from the UN. Millions of us (including opponents of this decision in the US) took to the streets to protest, but we couldn’t

change the mind of Georges W. Bush or Tony Blair, who told viewers after the biggest march in London that the fact that Saddam Hussein possessed WMD was reason enough to go to war. That turns out to be inaccurate information now. What struck and scared me was the manipulation of American public opinion in the run-up to – and during the war. I took a plane to Washington on March 21<sup>st</sup> 2003, the day the war in Iraq started (I seem to have a knack for picking out unfortunate dates), to participate in the annual conference of the AAAL. I could see the Pentagon from my hotelroom window. As a Belgian, I was a citizen of one of the countries belonging to the so-called “axis of weasels”. I was horrified at how the media and a part of the American public suddenly turned against everything French, and what ridiculous forms this reached with the renaming of French fries into Freedom fries (they should be called “Belgian” fries by the way). How could so many usually relaxed Americans, such staunch defenders of democracy and free speech, suddenly adopt such a hostile attitude towards those who disagreed with them? I couldn’t believe my ears when I heard about the incident with the Dixie Chicks who spoke out against the war and were instantly ostracised, or the criticism uttered by Michael Moore during the Oscar ceremonies, which was widely reported in disapproving tones on the American networks but usually without actually presenting the actual fragment. The argument to silence the opposition reminded me of the strategies employed in the former Soviet Union: the ruling communists didn’t want independent trade unions because, they said, the Party represented the people. To speak up against the Party is to speak up against the people, and therefore an act of treason. Similarly, to speak up against the Iraq war made one anti-patriotic and clearly undesirable. One particular episode stands out during my stay in the US. Having been stopped for speeding in the town of Independence, California, the highway patrol officer acted extremely professionally and was very courteous until he perceived a French accent in my English. At that point he turned into a bully, stating that the French were bastards and were not welcome in the US. I pointed out that I was Belgian, an important nuance to me. Nuance is also needed in my own story. This one little incident should not be blown out of proportion. Many Americans participated in anti-war demonstrations and defended liberal views. My American colleagues at the AAAL conference in Washington, at the TESOL conference in Baltimore, and finally at the International

Symposium on Bilingualism in Phoenix, were extremely friendly and tolerant. Claire Kramersch invited me to dinner at her home in Berkeley. Claire, Susan Ervin-Tripp and Dan Slobin expressed their horror at the turns of events and the attitude of some of their compatriots. Susan pointed to the dismantling of bilingual education and a latent xenophobia in California dating back to the internment of second generation Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor. She expressed her indignation at the fact that many Americans and many American politicians think that it is "excusing terrorism" to examine its causes. Dan reminded me of historical precedents: the word "sauerkraut" had been replaced by "liberty cabbage" in World War I and music by German composers had been banned. Claire told us that she learned German as a foreign language in France after the World War II precisely because it was the "language of the enemy". She wanted to understand how this enemy's country could have been at war with France for so many generations, when she admired its poetry, its music and its philosophy so much. She also wondered how her grandmother, who, having lived through three Franco-German wars, could hate the Germans and admire them at the same time. Claire and her fellow students who studied Germanistik in France after World War II were inspired by the same idealism, namely to undo the damages of war between Germany and France.

Are these wonderfully hospitable and open-minded Berkeley friends becoming a minority? European colleagues and friends who have lived in the US for a long time consider leaving and returning to Europe because of the deterioration of the general sociopolitical climate. Many other Europeans I met during my trip felt uncomfortable. The events of 9/11 and the reactions it provoked across the world strengthened my conviction that applied linguists have an important – if modest - sociopolitical role to play. We are uniquely placed to comment on the benefits of cultural and linguistic diversity, and we do have the expertise to combat prejudice linked to multilingualism and multiculturalism. We are generally tolerant and respectful people, interested in describing and understanding differences. We try to understand the bigger picture by modestly proposing small pieces of the jigsaw. We are aware that there is a continuum between good and evil, between black and white and do not jump to conclusions too easily. Contrary to what George W. Bush famously declared, we "do in nuance". We know that other people might not share our views on what is true, or important, or funny,

or evil. We know that our views of reality are affected by the culture in which we live. We try to teach these values to our students. Yet, we need to make our voices heard outside our classrooms and our specialised journals. We cannot hide in our ivory towers pretending that everything is fine while lowering the drawbridge only to let like-minded people in. Noam Chomsky is an excellent example of a linguist with strong social and political engagement. While one does not necessarily have to agree with all his views, one cannot but admire his critical stance and his engagement to fight for justice.

What can we, English-speaking applied linguists, do to promote diversity and equality? For a start, I think we need to implement symbolic acts. Language choice is often interpreted as a political act, something I know only too well as a former inhabitant of Brussels. I used to systematically address people in Dutch before switching to French when the interlocutor admitted not knowing the city's minority language. When our king addresses the parliament, he switches constantly between French and Dutch, and adds something in German, to show respect to the three main language communities in Belgium. It seems to me that English-speaking applied linguists must be aware that their sole use of English, and the limitation of their literature searches to material published in English may be perceived as arrogant by non-native users of English, or by researchers who don't know English. If more major English language research journals were to regularly review books published in other languages, it would certainly be perceived by non-native users of English as a small symbolic act of goodwill, and it would benefit the field as a whole<sup>1</sup>. Can more publishers follow the example of Peter Lang and publish books on linguistics and bilingualism in different languages? While some journals like the *International Review of Applied Linguistics* have unfortunately decided to no longer accept articles in other languages but English, some smaller journals such as *Estudios de Sociolingüística* have maintained their multilingual policy.

What consequences did 9/11 and the subsequent events have on me personally? It made me rethink the kind of research I was pursuing. I realised that my work on sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics in Second Language Acquisition, while highly interesting, had little social or political relevance. I therefore decided to focus more on

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<sup>1</sup> Some major non-language specific journals like the *International Journal of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education* already do so.

issues that are theoretically interesting but also socially relevant to multilinguals, immigrants and to political decision-makers. I also became more involved in professional organisations of applied linguists as I believe that through their publications and conferences they may reach a wider general audience. Indeed, it seems to me that the world needs to be better informed about issues of multiculturalism, multilingualism, and intercultural communication. These topics should figure in school curricula all over the world, and the general media could help in providing unbiased information that can help rectify some of the common prejudices in this domain.

To sum up, in the light of 9/11 I think that all of us can actively contribute to the promotion of democratic values and mutual respect, not only as individuals but also as members of a profession that encourages critical thinking and that cherishes theoretical, linguistic, cultural and political diversity. I therefore hope to meet you all at the next AILA World Congress in Madison in 2005 (see [www.aila2005.org](http://www.aila2005.org)). It provides an ideal forum for all the members of the different national affiliates to present their research in a wide variety of languages on an equally diverse number of languages. And one can optimistically expect that the fruit of all that labor will find its way to a wider audience.

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