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Watch Your Language

One of the most fascinating phenomenons of humanity is the history of interaction, whether on the individual scale or large civilizations, communicating timeless customs and traditions. Among all of the aspects that make a culture thrive, evolve and create substance, language prevails as the universal driving force, being both the tool as well as the perpetrator itself. But as the world transforms into a position of exponential growth and striving for efficiency, how does the way society communicate restrain or assist the evolution mankind is moving through? Using specific examples of cultural superiority, situational irony and universal analogies, David Sedaris's 'Jesus Shaves' and Barbara Hamby's 'Ode to American English' accurately depict language's immense impact to halt, alter and expand one's ability to convey ideas.

The illusion of superiority among nations has always depended heavily on a key lack of understanding from one culture to another. Sedaris notes cleverly the senselessness in disconnecting oneself completely from another by portraying a simple difference of opinion, claiming "if [he] could hope to one day carry one a fluent conversation, it was a relatively short leap to believing a rabbit might visit [his] home," as opposed to a bell, "So why stop there?" (436) Through simple clarification, the menial change in belief could have been explained; however, due to the characters lack of ability to convey, the interaction steered in a completely

different direction. This assumption that others should be able to understand another's viewpoint instantly is another fallacy that continues to grow today. Alongside the decline of communication in specific aspects, consisting mostly of old technology, "Human relations as a whole have also been affected by the acceleration and intensification of information flows allowed" (Storto, Biondo 80) by new technologies and access to communication with those thousands of miles away. This can pose as a serious problem in terms of exchanging information should the participants of said sharing of ideas fail to acquire the amount of knowledge about the other's culture to respect and see them as an equal.

In addition, Hamby is successful in portraying the skewed sense of inferiority of language in America's stereotypically casual English compared to 'proper' British-English, Hamby's homesick character openly scrutinizes the English "with their Oxfordian accents... how could they understand" (8-9) the methods of those from America. Perhaps it is due to the admiration of English Literature, or even the 66,500 plus words Shakespeare knew that causes Americans to feel inferior; in either case, Hamby's poem hits on this topic with precision. In fact, due to discrimination in television and production companies in Latin America, translating a show for the sake of broadcasting in multiple countries is difficult to find work for due to a recent lack of interest in sharing common shows. According to a journalist that spoke with several managers of production companies and translators throughout the area, only "A small number of major firms have emerged that enjoy considerable success both within and across national borders" despite the fact that "Dubbing production activities demonstrably inform... understanding of the relationship between production and culture" (Bernaba par.2-3). Hamby does well to satirically point at the fact that due to tension between cultures, language can often halt intermixing ideas.

Throughout the character's experience in the classroom setting, Sedaris paints a point of view that uses humor to make evident the situational irony of how absurd something can sound if worded the wrong way. After a Moroccan student expressed their lack of knowledge on the Easter holiday, several of the classmates attempted to speak in French to explain the event. In their unsuccessful efforts, the Moroccan surmised that Easter was no more than "A dead man with long hair supposedly living with her father, a leg of lamb served with palm fronds and chocolate" (436), an obviously vague and unfulfilled perspective of Easter. Although the description makes an extremely complicated and foolish view of the Christian faith, Sedaris is clever in making sure that nothing in the description was incorrect. As odd as the attempt was orchestrated by the students in the story, language was successful in making the very same story that has been shared and considered holy for thousands of years a completely idiotic ritual in the eyes of the Moroccan and the reader. Unfortunately, something such as faith or humor is very specific to cultures and can often be difficult to communicate. It is as if language has the ability to hold great weight on topics, to the degree that something as dense in culture as humor must be held to great care as far as phrasing to be well translated and understood by others.

Unfortunately, in many cases, "Despite speaking good English, [many] non-native English language migrants... still face language challenges in informal settings... there were still barriers when using humour" (Westcott 1), especially that of which they had yet to be exposed. Sedaris's humor may have unknowingly made a strong statement that something such as faith-related conversation, political discussion and even information on culture all are rich with a need to be surrounded with linguistic complexities and formalities based on where one lives. With this in mind, it is important to see that humor, being a tool within the umbrella of language, is something very capable of isolating or bringing people together.

Today, there appears to be an aura of annoyance for the wide variety of languages, rather than a consolidated few. Hamby is successful in painting out that over time, our history has favored diversity in the long run and satirically pokes at modern preference for watered own language, exclaiming that “no one uses the King James anymore, only plain-speak versions, in which Jesus, raising Lazarus from the dead, says “Dude, wake up”” (18-21). The clear absurdity of rephrasing the Bible this way is the perfect example of how language is both affecting our culture and giving a perfect point of reference to where we currently are. Comparatively, this movement is simply a continuation of Martin Luther and St. Jerome’s efforts to translate a now widely-accessible piece of literature. In many ways this expansion of literature to every end of the earth and in every language has managed to backfire in some ways. One would assume that the ability to translate throughout all languages would give the ability to communicate better. However, this “unrestricted freedom of choice and the associated unbridled consumerism, advocated by market capitalism as means of achieving personal fulfillment and a happier and better life tend to lead citizens, especially in the more developed and technological societies, to a state of constant dissatisfaction and inability to make decisions” (Storto Biondo 81) and communicate as once was commonplace. If one has ever gone to a hotel for the night and found an extremely mass produced and adored, yet untouched Bible in the middle drawer right under the alarm clock and old lamp, this should make a bit of sense. When Hamby references to this, it should bring an awareness to the reader that language in itself is a tool requiring careful attention and balance just as any other.

Despite all that drives and divides humanity regarding language, the power it holds can always be traced back to how it brings people together. Sedaris, usually sticking to a humorous method of conveying large themes, steps down to a simple truth in his piece to remind us that “In

communicating any religious belief, the operative word is faith, a concept illustrated by our very presence” (436). With religion, faith is what holds various individuals together without a doubt; Sedaris ultimately hoped to give an even bigger theme from this, even this universal ‘faith’ is only a tool used and fabricated by the language of those in need of it. In Sedaris’s story, the very objective of sitting in the classroom, the reason humans from everywhere came to learn, the reason the teacher’s views had become what they were, and the orchestrator of every perspective present was language. With something as large and important as faith, the methodology of using language to demonstrate and convey it can become quite overwhelming. Despite the complications with the details of ritual and practice in Sedaris’s story, he is able to show the character’s sympathy and, although filled with refutation on basis of opinion, understanding of the teacher’s viewpoint. The majority of “Jesus Shaves” consists of the character pondering upon the differences of beliefs by reframing the two sides altogether, although this is the only information the character has since he is unfamiliar with anything beyond the basics of the French language. Today, linguists, as well as many scholars, claim that “attempts have been recently made to uncover the dynamics of anxiety [associated with] foreign language” (Shirvah 1), assuming language was the problem. It would not be false to assume there is a specific reason that languages do not directly translate; this can easily be backed up by the simple pattern of human nature. It would be foolish for anyone to assume that anywhere from the individual level, all the way to comparing one geographical society to another should be able to effectively exchange and share with perfect efficiency. It is this universal truth that just as language is a bridge that brings us together, this ‘bridge’ must have a width and certainly will have limitations for transferring ideas. Although Sedaris’s character focuses only on the differences between these faiths, the story he paints reflects very strongly on the fact that regardless of the fact that all

of the students are there for the same reason, to learn French, they are all absolutely different from one another and to a degree that difference should be understood and respected. Language has always proven to be a useful tool in assisting human beings to find that balance between giving up things to understand another and keeping true to oneself in essence.

In the same way, Hamby uses satire of the formalities humans can often tag onto the constraints of language to bring out one of the universal understandings of interaction between humans. Perhaps one could argue that there are rules made in order to steer a society into a way of thinking or communicating with one another. Her comment on “the inability of 90% of the population to get the present perfect” (16) might make one question the reasoning behind the lack of interest in conforming to predetermined rules of communication. In a time period such as this where efficiency of communication is made out to be so important, and almost half of the letters of a word can simply be cut out in order to make for faster typing in the event of ‘texting’ another individual, this line in Hamby’s poem rings true to the observation that language, although socially constructed by and for humanity, certainly does not follow the exact flow by which it was thought to. Throughout history, humans have often made one of two mistakes with communication: (1) the objective of creating a new language became too extreme in its efforts to be efficient to the point of having no sentimental or cultural significance, or (2) Allowed the social desires of the masses to completely rearrange the rules of how a language will fabricate meaning into society too frequently. Not only does this pose a problem to intergenerational beliefs across the spectrum of those already considered ‘in’ a culture, but “grammatical interference is one of the fundamental difficulties faced by the learners of second languages” (Jafarova 292) as well. Language often has no way of honing itself between being efficient and desirable, too easily jumping between extremes. It is even possible to have the extreme of both or

lack of both at the same time, causing the same symptoms and issues in the way a group interacts with both itself and the outside. Considering the massive growth in globalization and need to effectively exchange ideas with other cultures, Hamby's satire on specific societies ability to find a balance on the flow of languages evolution should be strongly paid attention to. In essence, language has his own way of bringing people together just as much as it can pull apart. Even if to someone Jesus is just another man that came to "say hello to the peoples" (435), Sedaris and Hamby show that it is not the religion that matters, it is the idea of conveying an idea itself.

In contrast to the way mankind has attempted to manipulate and bend language to its will, these two pieces serve to prove that the concept truly seems to have a mind of its own. Through centuries of evolving and utilizing technologies to improve, it has always been and will (hopefully) always remain a centerpiece for both cultures and the way one holds themselves as an individual living in a group larger than themselves. Through the study and balance between manipulation and observing, it is evident that there will always be something more to learn about how language has become one of the deepest aspects of interaction. Language is not always forming into what we need it to be, but just as we all miss our English, Sedaris and Hamby have uprooted the simple truth that it will ways have influence on interaction.

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Westcott, Harriet and M. Laura Vazquez Maggio. "Friendship, Humour and Non-Native Language: Emotions and Experiences of Professional Migrants to Australia." *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies*, vol. 42, no. 3, Mar. 2016, pp. 503-518. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/1369183X.2015.1064764.

Annotated Bibliography

Bernabo, Laurena. "Progressive Television, Translation, and Globalization: The Case of Glee in Latin America." *Velvet Light Trap*, vol. 80, 2017, pp. 66-79. EBSCOhost, ezproxy.latech.edu:2048/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2017442934&site=eds-live&scope=site.

This article was made by a journalist who interviewed several Argentinian translators and directors of the show Glee in parts of Latin America. The article spoke about the filter that media often has to go through in order to align with the local belief and culture. It contained information about the ethics of disconnecting the original meaning from things like a TV show when switching from country to country.

Hamby, Barbara. "Ode to American English." Barbara Hamby, barbarahamby.com/pages/poems/Babel/ode_to_american_english.shtml.

This is one of the two primary resources. The intent is to take key parts of the poem to touch on the three main points on language and its interaction with society.

Jafarova, K. "The Problem of Interference and Its Influence of Learners Native

Language." *Trakia Journal of Sciences*, vol. 15, no. 4, Dec. 2017, pp. 292-296.

EBSCOhost, doi:10.15547/tjs.2017.04.003.

This academic journal was written for observing the difficulties of learning a second language based upon what your first language is. It provides a very objective view of these difficulties; the intent is to use this article for quoting generalized explanations of language barrier breaking methodology.

Sedaris, David. "Jesus Shaves" *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, edited by Kelly

Mays, 11th ed., W.W. Norton, 2013, pp. 471-473.

This is one of the two primary resources. The intent is to take key parts of the poem to touch on the three main points on language and its interaction with society.

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Psychological Bulletin, vol. 48, no. 4, Dec. 2017, pp. 489-503. EBSCOhost,

doi:10.1515/ppb-2017-0056.

This article talks about language anxiety and the tension associated with learning another language. The intent is to use the culture aspect of this article, touching on the fact that language is directly connected with what a person considers 'close to home' and

familiar. This will drive home the importance of language on the sense of self.

Storto, André Coutinho and Biondo Fabiana Poças. "The Mobility between Languages and the Fluxes of Globalization: Reviewing Paradigms, Transcending Paradoxes." *Revista Da Anpoll*, Vol 1, Iss 40, Pp 77-89 (2016), no. 40, 2016, p. 77. EBSCOhost, doi:10.18309/anp.v1i40.1018

A large portion of the information and context for the paper expanded from this article. This article, based on two researches of linguistics specifically, discussed the connection between globalization and language in a way that made sense and included the social-related changes it is making. One of them especially was the sensory overload of communication causing a paralysis and stagnation overall.

Westcott, Harriet and M. Laura Vazquez Maggio. "Friendship, Humour and Non-Native Language: Emotions and Experiences of Professional Migrants to Australia." *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies*, vol. 42, no. 3, Mar. 2016, pp. 503-518. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/1369183X.2015.1064764.

This article focuses a lot on professional migrants informally interacting with those of other cultures, intermixing different kinds of humor. Humor is an extremely important aspect of culture and language both. The intent is to use this to back up something humorous in Hamby's poem.

Essay Outline

Thesis: Using specific examples of cultural superiority, situational irony and universal analogies, David Sedaris's 'Jesus Shaves' and Barbara Hamby's 'Ode to American English' accurately depict language's immense impact to halt, alter or expand one's ability to convey ideas.

I. Cultural superiority

Quote from "Jesus Shaves" "If I could hope to one day carry on a fluent conversation, it was a relatively short leap to believing that a rabbit might visit my home" as opposed to a bell, "So why stop there?" (436)

-Already written, expand a little

Quote from "mobility" "Human relations as a whole have also been affected by the acceleration and intensification of information flows allowed" (Storto, Biondo 80)

-Sedaris's story as a whole is literally about globalized people attempting to use language, the finest currently known solution to this 'mobility paralysis' globalization has been causing.

II.

Quote from "Ode..." "With their elegant Oxfordian accents, how could they understand" (8-9)

-Already written, expand a little

Quote from "The Case of Glee" "A small number of major firms have emerged that enjoy considerable success both within and across national borders" despite the fact that "Dubbing production activities demonstrably inform our understanding of the relationship between production and culture" (Bernaba par.2-3)

-Due to tension between cultures, language can often halt intermixing ideas

III. situational irony

Quote from "Jesus Shaves" "A dead man with long hair supposedly living with her father, a leg of lamb served with palm fronds and chocolate" (436)

-Completely absurd but in all reality, it is exactly what Christianity claims. Language can make the same thing sound godly to goofy

Quote from "humor" "Despite speaking good English, these non-native English language migrants... still face language challenges in informal settings... there were still barriers when using humour" (Westcott 1)

-This humor Sedaris uses manages to touch base with different cultures. Humor is important

IV.

Quote from “Ode...” “no one uses the King James anymore, only plain-speak versions, in which Jesus, raising Lazarus from the dead, says, “Dude, wake up,”” (18-21)

-Already written, expand

Quote from “mobaility” “The unrestricted freedom of choice and the associated unbridled consumerism, advocated by market capitalism as means of achieving personal fulfillment and a happier and better life tend to lead citizens, especially in the more developed and technological societies, to a state of constant dissatisfaction and inability to make decisions” (Storto Biondo 81)

-language translation isn't easy now, imagine back then

V. universal analogies

Quote from “Jesus Shaves” “In communicating any religious belief, the operative word is faith, a concept illustrated by our very presence” (436)

-What is universal is the faith, language assists us in communicating it.

Quote from “Shirvah” “attempts have been recently made to uncover the dynamics of anxiety [associated with] foreign language” (Shirvah 1)

-language can often be what hurts our ability to communicate this faith

VI.

Quote from “Ode...” “the inability of 90% of the population to get the present perfect” (Hamby 16)

-language does not follow our structure, it goes its own way

Quote from “interference” “grammatical interference is one of the fundamental difficulties faced by the learners of second languages” (Jafarova 292)

-language is a striving to intermix one's culture with another, yet remaining one's own

Quote from “Jesus Shaves” “say hello to the peoples” (435)

-already written, expand

Conclusion: In contrast to the way humankind...