From the ambivalent creation of linguistic diversity at Babel in Genesis 11:1-9 to the reception “each in our own native language” of the Pentecost proclamation of “God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:1-11, NRSV) and beyond, language has been a source of theological reflection with important practical implications. Perhaps this is most positively expressed in the Qur’an: “And one of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colors; most surely there are signs in this for the learned” (30:22).

Languages shape worldviews and participate in the construction of individual and collective identities. They are a means of dynamic traditioning that connect people to communities, locally and across time and space. Languages also function as turf markers establishing who belongs and who does not fit in. They exclude as much as they include. Three seemingly unrelated vignettes illustrate the power of language and provide insight as to why it might be wise for the learned to pay attention. From my perspective as a pastoral theologian, not as a scholar of liturgy or language, I share these reflections to invite us to think more deeply about the complex relationships among language, community, and the daily life of the church.

Three Windows into Language

Amidst the immigration rallies of spring 2006, British music executive Adam Kidron produced a Spanish-language translation of the U.S. National Anthem recorded by an ensemble of primarily Latino/a artists. Controversy greeted the release of Nuestro Himno (Our Anthem) though the first verse—the one commonly sung and popularly understood as the national anthem—was closely based on a 1919 Spanish language translation commissioned by the U.S. Bureau of Education and available on the web page of the U.S. State Department. A fusion of Latino hip-hop, pop, and rap, the genre created less a stir than the language; after all, creative interpretations of the anthem are a daily occurrence at sports venues across the country. Underlying the visceral reactions on all sides were issues of identity and belonging. From Kidron’s perspective, “It’s the one thing everybody has in common, the aspiration to have a relationship with the United States” (Montgomery). However,
national identity, monolingually constructed in terms of English, had somehow been challenged. Conveniently forgotten was the public translation of the national anthem that has existed for decades in a language other than English—namely, American Sign Language (ASL), as many of our Deaf brothers and sisters well know.

This oversight is curious considering the fashionable trend to teach babies sign language. This movement, aimed at hearing parents with hearing children, achieved popularity with the movie *Meet the Fockers* and the increase of celebrity moms touting the joys of communicating with their young. While there are advantages to raising bilingual children and facilitating communication with pre-oral language infants, the initiative is not without controversy. Evaluating the movement, one of its pioneers, Linda Acredolo, observed, “When a baby signs, it helps them get up on their verbal legs. . . . Signing is to crawling as talking is to walking” (Donaldson-Evans). Unfortunately this observation underscored the concerns raised by critics, namely, that there is an implicit temptation to consider oral language as superior, and there is a danger of disconnecting language from the communities of those who use that language.

In their June 2006 meeting, the U.S. Bishops approved what would be the most significant changes in the English-language liturgy since the reforms of Vatican II. According to Bishop Arthur Roche of Leeds, England, chair of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL), this attempt to render a more faithful translation of the Latin enables a closer link between the language of the Bible and the liturgy: “In using a translation that is more faithful to Sacred Scripture we are teaching ourselves and our people to speak Bible” (Roche). However, for some these changes are not only linguistically awkward but a pastoral burden to be endured at an inopportune time.

**Signs for the Learned**

Language is created by community and in turn it facilitates the creation of community. As the three examples cited above demonstrate, language-related issues are not without controversy, and the history of translation is, to borrow a phrase from Justo González, a non-innocent one. In preparation for liturgical changes in the English-speaking church and as we continue to address the linguistic diversity of the U.S. Catholic Church, it is worth remembering that language matters and a degree of sensitivity and sensibility might go a long way. What insights does reflection on these contemporary linguistic vignettes yield?

At the heart of each is the undeniable connection between language and community. *Nuestro Himno* represents an affirmation of belonging, to a nation built on a foundation of ideals and intertwined rights and responsibilities, not a particular ethnicity. At the same time, *Himno*’s existence questions whether one must eradicate all aspects of identity in order to fit in. Is sure of difference necessary to create common cause? Infants are taught to sign in order to relate more clearly with their families and primary care givers. Yet are signing hearing children and their hearing parents engaged with the Deaf communities whose language they borrow? Don’t languages connect us to communities and cultures beyond our own? The proposed liturgical changes reflect a desire to express continuity with Catholic communities globally across the English-language spectrum as well as across time with ancestors in the faith. But languages, even those shared in common, reflect the particular contexts within which they arise and are used daily. What makes a particular translation more sacred than another, and how does one account for regional preferences and usages? Languages are dynamic. They are fluid and evolving, local and particular, points of intersection...
that mark our multiple belonging to communities that transcend time and space.

One of the primary aims of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II was the “fully conscious and active participation” by all the people (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 14). In service to this end, eventually celebration in the vernacular was approved “for the sake of a better comprehension of the mystery being celebrated.”

Full and active participation also entailed recognition of the experience of the living community:

. . . while many expressions, drawn from the Church’s most ancient tradition and familiar through the many editions of the Roman Missal, have remained unchanged, many other expressions have been accommodated to today’s needs and circumstances. Still others, such as the prayers for the Church, the laity . . . the community of all peoples, and certain needs proper to our era, have been newly composed.

From a certain perspective, participation appears to be the goal of Nuestro Himno, and it is also part of what is missing in teaching hearing infants sign language. Participation—full, active and conscious—presumes the presence of community; for example, St. Elizabeth of Hungary, the “home” parish for the Deaf community in the Archdiocese of New York, or St. Francis of Assisi Deaf Center in the Archdiocese of Washington, or the Holy Angels Church of the Deaf in the Los Angeles Archdiocese or Catholic Campus Ministry at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. It is our Deaf sisters and brothers who challenge concepts of communal participation that privilege orality and aurality, and remind all that linguistic diversity in the U.S. Catholic Church is far more complex than bilingual paradigms allow as immigration reshapes the contexts of the church and the Deaf community.

Addressing linguistic diversity is more than a matter of translations, bilingual missals, and fluent presiders. Speaking practically, it involves a prioritization of commitment, resources, and personnel. Without sustained reflection on language as a source of our doing theology, and as a component of community and identity, diversity will be perceived as an obstruction to unity and a challenge for ministry. Without sustained conversation on the role of language in securing full, active, and conscious participation and in connecting contemporary daily experience across contexts, time, and place, liturgical reforms will elicit an exasperated, “What for? Why now?”

These language matters invite the church in the United States to navigate the tension of respecting particularity while retaining unity, of being a community of inclusion but not assimilation. Sometimes, as ministers, theologians, and people of faith we are tempted to embrace inclusion naively. There is need for caution here. In American Sign Language, the sign for mainstreaming visually expresses what could be described as inclusion, left hand down fingers spread moving toward right hand in the same configuration. The result gives an impression of integration, an encounter of mutuality where each digit and hand maintains its own integrity. However, for a number of Deaf people, the experience of mainstreaming is not necessarily positive. In response another sign was created, in mockery, reflecting not opportunity but assimilation. In this sign, only the index finger on the right hand moves toward the open five of the left; the image is not one of inclusion, but of “only one Deaf person in the midst of a mass of hearing people, and the Deaf person is subordinately squashed” (Jankowski, 89–90). Surely there are signs in this for our ministries.
Notes

1 Excerpt from the English translation of *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (Third Typical Edition)*, no. 15, © 2002, International Committee on English in the Liturgy, Inc. (ICEL). All rights reserved.

2 Ibid.

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