

Poem II:
Right in One Language

Exercise II.2:

Background: What it means to be bilingüe/bilingual is a recurring theme in all genres of Chicano/a literature. Living “across borders” and in-between languages is a way of life for all immigrants and their descendants, a condition their present families know—and their ancestors knew—intimately. Bilingualism is the way of life for increasing numbers of Americans. The trauma of losing or retiring one’s mother tongue is an American story, and a global story. The empowerment of saving and deploying one’s native language is also part of that story. Tafolla’s poem, “Right in One Language,” grapples with that story and its implications.

Language is a person’s cultural keystone. Language choice implicates the speaker politically, socially, economically, emotionally, artistically—in almost every aspect of living. Power struggles surround language choice at the street-level, and also in the realm of the imagination. This poem asks, How does it feel to have to choose when, where and with whom to speak one’s language(s)? How must it feel to be forced to favor a second language over your preferred or mother tongue?

Writing that alternates between different languages called “code switching,” a term that became more well known with the rise of Chicano/a Literature in the 1960s and 1970s. While “Right in One Language” takes a challenging stance on the bilingualism debate, its overall tone is playful, beginning with the title. Though the poet disagrees with the “gringos” who insist her words should “Match-Match,” she flaunts her “Mix-Mix” without bitterness. She gleefully evokes a father of the English canon, Geoffrey Chaucer, in defense of her polyglot poem. Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* are written in middle English liberally larded with French, a style that Tafolla subtly suggests Chaucer’s readers were quite used to. This literary allusion to Chaucer helps make her point that to be bilingual is not a problem. To make use of all vocabularies that make up our “hybrid wealth” is not only fun but natural—is, in fact, sensible. The poem (and the reader) can take it. The poem and the reader know that “There is room/here/for two/tongues/inside this/ kiss.”

Discussion Questions and Exercises:

1. A language warm-up suggested by Ben Johnson, a blogger at Edutopia: Engage students in the ancient wisdom of metaphors and sayings, that is, *dichos*.

“To get students thinking and using the Spanish language, I print a dicho (saying) such as, “En boca cerrada no entra mosca!” (in a closed mouth, flies don’t enter) on the board and asked them to decipher the Spanish and then the true meaning. Once we get beyond the literal interpretations, then students can derive approximate meanings. Some dichos just stumped them: “En casa del herrero, cuchillo de palo” (in the house of the blacksmith, a wooden knife). The key is not to give the students the answers. Students begin to see the deeper messages in the dichos and are able to transfer that skill to see deeper messages in Spanish humor and literature. (Adapted from *Edutopia*, Ben Johnson’s Blog, post on “Teacher Leadership and teaching abstract thinking.” January 13, 2012)

2. Tafolla's "Right in One Language" is meant to be performed as well as read from the page. Have students listen to or watch the poet recite the poem, without handing out copies yet. After the performance, ask the class to respond to these questions:

- What do the "agents" and "the Man" want the poet to do to her poem? Who are the agent and the Man?
- How many languages do you hear in the poem?
- Ask any Spanish speaker to repeat a phrase/line she liked. Ask any English speaker to repeat a phrase/line she liked. Ask why they liked that particular line of the poem.
- Read the "Leave it to Beaver" stanza again—Stanza three. Ask the class, What is "Leave it to Beaver"? What is that 1960s TV family doing in this poem?
- Ask the class, without yet showing them a text of the poem, what they think this poem looks like on the page. (form/ free verse/ line)

3. Pass out copies of the poem: have the class read stanza 7, the Chaucer stanza. Talk about the suggestions the poet makes about her choices re language and Chaucer's use of languages. Perhaps bring a sample from *The Canterbury Tales* for the class to read and look at.

4. Write some Spanish lines and "Mix-Mix" lines from the poem on the board. Ask students to offer sample approximate meanings, in the spirit that Ben Johnson describes. The goal is to get students to think abstractly and figuratively.

—Exercise provided by JoAnn Balingit, Poet Laureate of Delaware.
Author of *Forage*