

Melanie Andrich, guest speaker

Phi Sigma Iota Initiation Ceremony

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Douglass Student Center

Thank you so much for having me here tonight to celebrate with you. I feel honored and touched to be able to give back to an organization that set me along the path to my profession and love of languages.

One thing you should know about me right from the start is that I'm a big science fiction fan. And like nearly everyone else, I absolutely loved the movie *The Matrix* when it first came out. In fact, my favorite part of *The Matrix* is when Tank turns to Neo and loads a program directly into his brain that allows him to acquire a lifetime's worth of knowledge and skill in a matter of moments. One minute he can barely use his legs, and the next minute he knows Ju Jitsu. Can you imagine what life would be like if you could just order up competency in anything instantaneously? Would that be heaven? If that were me, hmmm, let's see... Today, I'll master liquid eyeliner, the Argentine Tango, and, uh, rocket science! There wouldn't be nearly enough room on the Internet for MY Facebook profile!

Which brings up a question: if we had this kind of effortless proficiency, what language would we use to speak and write? If we could load all the world's languages into our heads in just a few hours, which ones would we use? Which one would you choose as your primary language? Would you use the same one to write in and speak with? Would you talk to your friends in one language, and strangers in another? Or keep one entirely for your own thoughts and journal? Or would you create whole new languages from bits and pieces of the ones that

you uploaded? Or would you finally just give it all up for a highly structured system of emoticons and personalized ring tones?

But, unfortunately, we don't have the ability to load this kind of knowledge into our heads all at once. We have to learn everything the hard way, the long way. Even more complicated, we have to be selective about what we learn, because all we have is one lifetime.

And you chose to spend a portion of it learning a new language. Why? Which one did you choose? Ok, you guys are the millennial generation, which means maybe you might even have chosen to learn two or three more languages. Check. But let's think about the first time you chose to work to acquire a new language, the first time you went through the process of making an effort to learn a new system of communication.

Because we can't, at the moment, each of us know all languages, and so choosing a language to learn is sort of like choosing a relationship partner, like forming an intimacy: a deep understanding of another in a world of so much lip service. This is very different from your first or birth language. Not long after you are born, you become aware of your first language, a certain style of verbal and written communication. And sort of like your family, you can't choose this one. This first language shapes you. It is indeed the one through which you initially develop and work out your identity and your understanding of yourself. Never underestimate the power of this first language over you and your perception of the world. Ah, but second languages... Second languages are an assertion of that identity and a willful application of that perception. That second language represents an act of desire.

Sure, maybe you're like me and you started a language for entirely superficial reasons. When I was younger, along with science fiction, my dad and I were big fans of Cold War spy novels. I was dazzled by the idea of codes, and breaking codes, and writing codes. I loved the idea of

layered communication, and imagined what it would be like to be part of a select group who could understand all the layers. But my attention span for the abstract noises of even Morse Code lasted all of one month, so my focus quickly turned to that mysterious mademoiselle of languages, French. And she was lovely. In spy novels, she's always clever and has a great wit. I loved it when authors would insert a few words of French in my spy novels so that I could run to a French dictionary and figure out if my guesses from the context clues were even close to right. And then I would appropriate those words in some precocious way over dinner to tease my dad with. Ah, mon père, mon père... si pauvre. Désolé. But it wasn't until high school that I really got a glimpse of French for all of her complexity and depth, and it wasn't until almost at the end of my college French major, when I studied abroad in Avignon my senior year, that I felt I could really do her justice at all.

As with any relationship that you build with care and devotion, connection and understanding grow. The more you learn, the more you realize how much there is still yet to know. You start to learn a language by building your vocabulary – beginning with the usual date night fodder: talking about the weather, the food, the movies, and try to avoid using the past tense as much as possible. Oh, sure, you flub it from time to time, like showing up at the library to meet with her instead of at the bookstore, (ah, right... librairie... bookstore! Ok, mental note). But you muddle through, finding your way slowly toward idioms, then literature, then concepts that allow you to express your feelings and moods, hopes, and ideas.

And then it gets interesting. You start to notice how little things about the language add up to a fairly complex code that is much more than proper syntax or idiomatic usage. In this code, you start to find the history and the values of an entire group of people. In my case, it was to understand the emphasis in French on formality and politeness, to understand how precious this language is to its people in very a different way than English is to Americans, uh... to know that I would never, NEVER know enough French to thoroughly understand French menus

and, finally, to understand the concept of le non-dit – that, in French, what ISN'T said is often the more ___meaningful___ communication. For example, the idiom for window-shopping in French translates directly to "lick the window" – huh. Helps me understand French women a bit.

The idiom for twilight in French translates directly to "between dog and wolf." And suddenly –

I understand French men! For you who are learning other languages, it might be that in Chinese, crisis and opportunity are the same word. Or that in Arabic, the concept of God and his will is built into the structure of everyday sentences. Or perhaps someone here tonight who knows a little Nepali knows that there are four words for uncle in order to communicate if he is the brother of one's father or mother, and if he is older or younger than his sibling. As the layers of meaning build up, your relationship with your chosen language begins to feel more special, more intimate.

Maybe you even choose to study abroad – sort of like meeting the parents, as it were. You begin to see the differences in French when she's at home versus when she's out in the world. You can see more clearly her roots, where she's coming from, what she's dealt with in her history. As your relationship becomes more sophisticated, you start to listen for all the turns of phrase and meanings that cannot be precisely duplicated in your own linguistic currency. You wonder if maybe certain ideas are only possible in another language, and suspect that certain solutions to certain problems come more easily in this new language. This language and everything it represents is unique.

Oh, sure... you'll fight and struggle. I swore French I'd never speak to her again after my introduction to the subjunctif, but you take a time out and try again. You see some of the limitations of the relationship, too. Maybe it's a trifle annoying that your pronunciation is being corrected... again. And you may never make peace with certain aspects of your relationship. Maybe you'll always have a heavy accent, no matter how hard to try to lose it. But over time,

you will find that you stop having to translate everything in your head. That using this language -- this code -- stops being so much work and starts to flow naturally from your own mind and lips. And you'll even dream together.

But probably the most surprising aspect to this relationship is how much you'll learn about yourself and your own codes and values. You'll begin to revisit what your own words really mean, and you might even change the way you use some of them to communicate more precisely. The internal logic of your own language, the nuances of your particular dialect and even the idiosyncrasies of your most common or creative misuses will show themselves in a new light. You will become thoughtful, reflective. And you will grow as the relationship continues to grow, even after you're comfortable and you've started to take it a little for granted.

I don't want to extend this metaphor into absurdity. We science fiction fans all know that at the heart of any great sci-fi story, whether it's about artificial intelligence, creatures from outer space, terra-forming Mars, or even the bottom of the ocean, that at the heart is the same story about one person, or one group of persons struggling with how to build a sustainable relationship with an alien life form, or an alien way of life. We fans tend to ramble on about it, I'm afraid, so I'll stop right there with THAT particular metaphor. But all of this is preface to what I most want to do: I want to applaud you for your choice to learn, and to wield, your languages. And, even more importantly, I want to challenge you. As you near the end of your undergraduate careers, you enter into the season of challenges, so here's mine:

Be prolific. Please. Use your English thoughtfully. Use your other language abilities actively. Don't let the relationships fade. Be prolific. Speak. Write. Blog. Compose. Podcast. Publish. Upload. Program. I want to see you in politics, in entertainment, on Wikipedia, when I Google,

and when I vote. No matter what language you're speaking, I put my faith in you and in what you have to say, because you choose language as a discipline worth devoting your time and minds to. Let me tell you why that's important.

Because I know you are acutely aware that there are real world consequences to the choice of words, as we are witnessing now in Paris and other cities throughout Europe. When the French Interior Minister related his plan to fight crime in Paris, he used the word *racaille* and the phrase *nettoyer au Kärcher*. Nettoyer means to clean and Kärcher is brand of power washer, and *racaille* is to imply that someone is scum, or repugnant. Applied to a class of people, there are consequences. Words and language are powerful forces. The effects of language take on a life of their own.

So I need you to be out there, too, using your languages to create more relationships and connections, better ones. I have worked in Study Abroad for the past 10 years, and I can tell you personally – it makes a difference when you get out there and help communicate. Help be the bridges. Don't just profess. Dialogue. It's all about the language.

And that's because language is ultimately optimistic - a promise among human beings to keep trying to relate. To consider each other worthy of relating to, and sharing with. There is nothing more global than the shared origins of words, nothing more individual than how words are put together. The way that you use your languages is the most compelling argument for who you are as a self. Even as the act of writing fades and signatures become obsolete, the transmission of selves and their relationships widens, and deepens, and lengthens into our very best hopes for the future.

Whatever you do, do not be silent.