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Bilingual Peacemaking

by J. Scott Miller, Dean

I recently had the occasion to travel to Baku, Azerbaijan, in connection with our adding Azerbaijani to the list of 70+ languages we teach regularly in the College of Humanities. Along the way, after a stop-over in Frankfurt, I overheard, on the early morning airport bus, two women speaking German to one another, both with unique accents unfamiliar to me.

Curious, I turned around to find a mother with two children talking to another woman traveling alone. I came to learn, from my passive eavesdropping, that the mother was Azerbaijani and the other woman Indian. Both were living in Germany, both traveling to Baku, and as they conversed in German, a tongue native to neither (nor to me), they bonded over children and travel and their immigrant experiences, and then parted to proceed on their journeys after warmly sharing contact information over their phones. How often, I wondered, does this scene of strangers connecting across language barriers repeat itself every day, all over the world?

I soon experienced it myself. As I navigated my way around my hotel and a nearby market, I used smiles, hand gestures, and a few Russian words from past study. Moreover, knowing that English is a distant third language in Baku, I had prepared myself by learning two simple phrases in Azerbaijani: “Hello” (*Salam!*), and “Thank you” (*Çok sağ olun*). No matter how impoverished our exchange of information, I ended every conversation with *Çok sağ olun!* At first, I did so with a question mark at the end, inviting the person I was speaking with to correct me. That often led to an impromptu lesson in pronunciation and sometimes a warm smile. After my pronunciation improved, people responded more naturally. I felt a sense of triumph, even belonging, when I returned to a market stall on the second day to buy more

items and received an approving smile from the owner when I said *Çok sağ olun!* more fluently. I sensed he was pleased, and I was grateful for his tutoring. Ours had not been a profound, intellectual, or complex verbal exchange, but I had connected with a stranger in a moment of linguistic play.

Two nights later, when I described to an Azerbaijani official the range and number of languages we teach at BYU, he was amazed, and asked (using a tongue not his own) if our large number of language courses were training for the missionaries who are sent all over the world. We explained that, rather, they were offered largely to serve those who had already been on missions when they returned to BYU, since they did not know where they

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were going until the call came. “You mean they only start learning the language right before they leave?” he exclaimed. “That is remarkable!” As an afterthought, he said, “Learning another language is very good. When you speak one language, you are one person; when you speak two languages, you are two persons.” I was struck by the thought and reflected on my experience at the market stall and realized that, for a brief instant, my use of simple Azerbaijani had allowed me to become a new creature—an expanded version of myself.

Learning another language is valuable not just because it allows us to order a meal, book a hotel room, or find our way around new places. Those are, after all, tasks we can increasingly delegate to our phones. But there is a reason the Lord refers to language employed

in His service as the *gift of tongues*. The human ability to create and use language, to memorize rudimentary phrases in another tongue from phone apps, or even to acquire fluency over years of language study, are singular achievements that underscore the miraculous capacity of the human brain. We are exceptionally clever at investigating the mystery of how language works and developing ways to help people learn other languages. But the *gift of tongues* manifests itself not in erudition nor in near-native fluency, but rather in the moment we connect with others. It is a gift because, through divine grace, we are able to use tongues not of our own to bond with people whom we might otherwise ignore, or even avoid. When we learn a new language we open the door to new relationships, gain access to a new community, and enlarge our perception of the human experience.

We are, through most of our lives, strangers in a strange land, and that makes us yearn for connection and belonging. In a post-Babel world, there are those who would use our ignorance of others, fostered by language barriers, to exaggerate difference, stoke enmity, and promote chaos that furthers their own self-serving designs. When we learn another language, we increase our capacity to understand others and to build bridges of understanding with brothers and sisters whom we currently do not know. Whenever we seek to use what language we may possess to reach out to others, the gift of tongues can help us become the bilingual peacemakers this world so desperately needs. **H**



Associate Deans Grant Lundberg and Ray Clifford, left, and Elder Paul Picard, right, meet an official from the Azerbaijani Institute of Theology.