

Jhumpa Lahiri, In My Words

Lucia Pasqualini (March 18, 2016)



Life is full of beautiful surprises. I have been following Jhumpa Lahiri for years, having discovered her books when I lived in New York. A friend of mine gave me *Interpreter of the Maladies* as a present. Nevertheless I hadn't known about her deep passion for the Italian language nor that she had spent three years in Italy learning Italian. The result of her stay in Rome was a book written in that language, *In altre parole*, a sincere ode to the Italian language, which makes Lahiri an extraordinary ambassador of Italian abroad.

I planned to purchase the bilingual version of the book during my next journey to New York, then something unexpected happened to me. One Monday morning I received a copy of her book in my office. An American girl who loves Italy and whom I have tried to help settle there, sent me a copy of the book. I was happy to receive it: it was as if she had read my mind. A couple of days later, I met



the director of the Center for American Studies in Rome, and he mentioned that Jhumpa Lahiri was going to present her book at the center the following week. What a thrill! He asked me if I wanted to be part of the event. I don't even remember what I said but I guess it was "yes," because the day after I received an invitation to a panel for which I was to be the moderator.

In *altre parole* describes Lahiri's personal journey of learning Italian, a language she considers a place of affection and reflection. Her account of the journey is poetically and magically touching. Her words took me back to my own personal story; every chapter reminded me of a chapter of my life. I had not expected Lahiri's world would turn out to be my world.

The book is about the story of a profound love for the Italian language, the kind of love that I have personally felt for languages since a very young age. Languages have always fascinated me. At six, I wanted to learn English. When I was 14 I obliged my parents to send me to a summer camp in England and refused to talk to them for a week until they finally consented. At the time, my English was miserable. My pronunciation and comprehension were very limited. In spite of all my efforts and my profound passion for the language, I always had the impression of not speaking it well enough. Dictation was a nightmare. Once I got a D: I still remember that defeat vividly. Nonetheless, I did not give up. I had several pen pals and I used to spend a lot of time writing to them. Each summer I went to England and my English was never good enough. My improvements were miniscule; in my eyes, everybody spoke better than me. In England I met a girl my age who spoke English marvelously. I admired her immensely and admired her knack for the language. She was my role model. If she made it, I could make it too. I had exactly the same feelings that Lahiri so impressively describes in her book: a continuous sense of failure.

One of the first chapters of Lahiri's book is dedicated to the dictionary, which made me smile to myself, since on Sunday mornings I used to read a monolingual dictionary. I would spend hours looking up new words and checking their proper pronunciation. I always kept a dictionary handy. I had many. They were all torn, like the one with the green plastic cover that Lahiri bought at the Rizzoli bookshop in Boston before her first trip to Italy. When I walked, I used to think in English. In my imagination I created stories and situations in English. It was my way of practicing the language.

I went to college to study political science, where I grew to realize that I wanted to understand the world and that languages were the key to opening many doors, the instrument with which to communicate with people from all over the world and to understand the world. I decided to study German, a language and culture that interested me greatly. In high school, I had been struck by Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*, a text about German customs. Then I studied Kant and became fascinated with his thinking and the categorical imperative. I wanted to understand him better, to read Kant in his own tongue.

I don't know if German chose me or I chose German. It was love at first sight, the kind of love Lahiri felt for Italian from the moment she encountered it: a true, elective affinity. Lahiri's magical world opened a door that I had kept half closed for many years. Page after page led me to reflect on my own experience and feelings, the sense of constant inadequacy in approaching a new and difficult language like German. Her arrival in Rome in the middle of August reminded of my arrival in Trier as an Erasmus student. I didn't know where to go and I was not sure I would be able to explain myself or even ask where the dormitory was. I knew I could speak English but I urgently wanted to become a part of that world. Immediately.

Lahiri's impassioned determination to learn Italian was the same as mine. And her experience in Rome was the same I had in Germany: The endless notebooks full of words, words that you fall in love with at first sight then vanish the day after in that incomprehensible ocean called the brain. The implacable effort to be part of a world you love profoundly yet will never completely be a part of. The unrequited love. The final awareness that there is no such thing as the perfect knowledge of another language no matter how much time and energy you dedicate to it. The surprising discovery that you do not belong to your mother tongue, either, but to a wider and much more relative dimension.

Being a diplomat brought me to China. I had never considered studying Chinese and had hitherto felt indifferent to the language. Nevertheless, when I was posted to the Italian embassy in Beijing I decided to study it. I could not conceive of living in China for four years without communicating with



the local population. I ended up finding Chinese very fascinating and stimulating. Learning Chinese opened my personal door to China. My knowledge of Chinese is limited but I dream of one day giving a speech in Chinese!

Conversing with Lahiri in Rome was an immense joy. The way she talked about her relationship with Italian is pure poetry, that poetry which comes both from the heart and that other mysterious place, the brain. I asked Lahiri if she was happy in Italy. She answered that it was the happiest period of her life. I couldn't help but think of Italians' own, quite different perspective of the country.

Thank you, Jhumpa, for being an extraordinary ambassador of the Italian language and of all the languages.

Thank you for sharing with us your fear which is my same one and of many others. I will never speak perfectly but I have learned not to be afraid of express myself in any language. People are more comprehensive and less judgmental that we are with ourselves. The beauty of learning languages stays in the process of learning a language and a culture, the essential key to understand the others and to dialogue with them.

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