Julie Sedivy
SAHLA keynote—June 18, 2022

Like many Canadians, English is not my mother tongue. For the first few years of my life, Czech was the only language I ever heard or spoke. When I started school in Canada, I could speak only a few words of English. But I did not succeed in holding on to my mother tongue. Even though my parents very much wanted me and my siblings to grow up speaking Czech, English quickly became the language we spoke at home. By the time I was a teenager, I had trouble expressing myself in Czech, even with my parents. I couldn't write letters to our relatives in Europe. I couldn't read Czech books. I couldn't express my political opinions in Czech or talk about complicated emotions with my parents, and because their English was limited, many things were left unsaid between us.

Many Canadians thought it was wonderful how quickly my siblings and I were absorbed into English—it was what good immigrants were supposed to do. No one (other than my parents) seemed concerned about the loss of our native language. It was only when I became an adult that I myself became aware of the depth of this loss. I felt it very sharply when my father suddenly died. I had many regrets that we had not communicated better with each other. And because he was at the time one of the only people with whom I spoke Czech at all, I also had the sense that his death now permanently cut me off from the culture that had shaped me. They say you don't know what you have until you lose it, and for me, that is partly true. The other part is that I really understood the importance of Czech to me once I began to regain it.

Several years ago, I was able to return to my father's village and spend several months there with my extended family, which allowed me to regain some of my mother tongue. This experience was utterly transformational for me; for the first time, I understood the context of my family's experiences and I was able to understand why my parents were the way they were. I was able to understand why I was the way I was. Since then, I've stayed more connected to the Czech language, and I try to read and listen to Czech programs as much as I can. As a result of this reconnection, I feel much calmer, more settled in myself, better able to live according to my deepest values. And even though I only write books in English, when I struggle to find the words to express myself, I spend some time immersed in the Czech language to try to remind myself of the feeling of language that I'm trying to capture and bring into my writing.

When I began the research for my book, I was struck by just how common the experience of language loss was. Around the world, among just about all immigrant groups, retaining the heritage language is a great challenge for second-generation immigrants, or even immigrants of Generation 1.5, who, like me, arrive in their new country as children. Even in families where parents try to speak the heritage language at home, it is very hard for children to grow up to be fully competent adults in the language. Why is this?

Julie Sedivy
SAHLA keynote—June 18, 2022

The reality is that a language being learned in childhood is surprisingly fragile. It's common knowledge that children's brains are different from adult brains when it comes to learning language. A child can learn a new language more easily than an adult—many adult immigrants see how quickly their children begin to surpass them in English. But what is less known is that it is also far easier for a child to forget their native language than it is for an adult. If an adult moves to a new country, after a while, they might feel a bit rusty in their native language, and it might take them longer to find the right word. But their grammar doesn't begin to completely melt. But this is what often happens to children who move from one country to another—without exceptionally strong support of the mother tongue, children who were once able to produce fluent and grammatical sentences in that language come to be unable to do so. This is the darker side of children's remarkable ability to learn new languages—it comes with a tendency to forget the old ones, often to a degree that is shocking to their parents. Achieving a stable bilingualism is not easy, and it requires more experience with the heritage language than most children can get at home.

Another reason why children often disconnect from their heritage language is that they are extremely sensitive to the social cues around them that let them know which languages are valued more than others. When I showed up at school knowing only a few words of English, I had the sense that to my teachers, I was a creature with no language at all, not a child who already had a rich linguistic life in Czech—that language was invisible to them, irrelevant. I quickly learned that English was a big, important, public language, and that Czech was a small, private one. When I spoke Czech to my siblings in the schoolyard, I got the feeling that, to the other kids, this was a weird thing to do. While working on my book, I read some recent research showing how children are less likely to want to be friends with kids who speak another language, even when they share a common language with those kids, and I thought of my experiences in the schoolyard, and how I quickly learned to avoid speaking Czech in the presence of other children.

I believe that my own language story—and those of so many newcomers to this country—could have been quite different if I'd had access to an excellent Czech language program and a community within which to speak it. I recently spoke with my physiotherapist, who is of Vietnamese ancestry. Even though he was born in Canada, he told me that he speaks, reads, and writes Vietnamese with ease, and he was surprised, as an adult, to learn that many second-generation immigrants could not speak their family's language. He told me how happy he was that his parents "forced" him to attend Vietnamese language school throughout his childhood.

Community language schools can play such an important role in pushing back against the powerful forces that pull children away from their heritage languages and absorb them completely in the mainstream language. They help children become literate in their language, which is known to be a protective factor against language loss. They give kids

the experience of their language as a public language, as a language in which important books have been written, as a language spoken by leaders and celebrities. I can't tell you how absent this was from my own experience of Czech. When I went back to the Czech Republic for the first time, I remember pulling into the train station in Prague and hearing Czech being spoken over the loudspeaker. This was the first time I had heard Czech spoken by a voice of authority. Hearing it felt as if one of my brothers had, as a joke, grabbed the microphone and begun speaking over the loudspeaker in our private family language. Of course I knew intellectually that Czech would be spoken in Prague. But to feel it was something different, and I had shivers all over at the realization that there was a whole nation full of people who spoke this language.

Community schools also give kids an environment in which the language is shared by peers. This is incredibly important, because research shows that from a very young age, children model their own language after that of their peers, not necessarily their parents or other adults in their community. And more than just language, their peer group gives them some friends with whom they share the experience of being bicultural—that is, they have friends with whom they can talk about some of the pressures of sometimes feeling caught between cultures, of not being fully understood either by their parents' generation, or by Canadian children who are not part of their heritage culture at all. It can give them a social space within which to work out their complicated identities.

This is so important. In my mind, asking children to choose between their ancestral culture and their adopted culture is much like asking children of divorced parents to be loyal to only one of their parents and give up their relationship with the other. There is a good deal of research that shows that when bicultural people feel connected to both of their cultures they do better—they are physically healthier, more socially connected, and more successful academically and financially. And I would add, in my case, more spiritually whole.

Sometimes, when I talk about the importance of language for a sense of identity, I get the feeling that people can be threatened by this. Under the surface, I think that there is often a worry that if we encourage people to be deeply rooted in their ancestral cultures, they'll be less loyal to Canadian culture at large. There is a concern that too much diversity might lead to divisions in our society. Like many people, I worry a great deal about the growing extent to which political divisions seem to be tearing societies apart. But I firmly believe that promoting connections to the multiple languages and cultures that have shaped us is likely to lead to less division, not more. This is because a big part of what it means to be bicultural or multicultural is to know what it is to have to resolve internal conflicts between values and social practices that are sometimes in tension with each other. As bicultural people, we are experts at maintaining relationships with people even when we don't fully agree with their traditions or social rules. We have practice at

explaining one culture to another. This is because we have to live with these different cultures inside of ourselves.

Some political scientists are now finding that having complicated identities, where the various parts of the self are in tension or conflict with each other, prevents people from becoming extreme in their political views. When people feel loyal to several different groups whose values sometimes clash, they are less likely to react with anger at someone who expresses a different opinion from their own. And some research also shows that when others see that it's possible for members of a different ethnic group to have complex identities in which they feel loyal to more than one group, this can reduce prejudice. For example, there was one Israeli study in which participants read descriptions of people of various ethnicities—those who read the about people who described themselves as Israeli Arabs who felt connected to both of those cultures later expressed less support for policies that discriminated against Arabs.

I want to end by saying that I'm hopeful that we might be able to prevent the massive language loss that has been normal until now, even in so-called multicultural countries like Canada. We now have better research and awareness about bilingualism, technologies that connect us globally, and most of all, the support of programs such as SAHLA and community language schools. I have some awareness, both personally and professionally, of the consequences of language loss and cultural disconnection and of the enormous benefits of multilingualism. And so, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart, for the incredible work that you all do day after day, to keep all our languages alive in our hearts and minds.