

Rachel Donadio / Middlebury Language Schools Commencement Address
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Thank you so much for having me here as your speaker this year, and for the privilege of this honorary degree. It's my first advanced degree, and I'm very moved by this gift. And unusually fortunate, because although I owe so much of my professional life as a foreign correspondent to the languages I learned at Middlebury, unlike you graduates I have not been quizzed on past participles in years!

First of all, congratulations to you on your graduation. You've worked so hard to reach this day — so many long hours and months and years to deepen your educations! — and you should be very proud of all you've accomplished.

I want to begin by dedicating what I have to say today to the memory of Huguette Knox, who died earlier this year, and who taught French at Middlebury College for many years. When I was growing up here I was frankly a bit afraid of Huguette. She was French, and therefore formidable, from a culture, I now know, in which familiarity is never assumed, it must be earned. I was intrigued by the entire Knox family — Ed Knox also taught French at Middlebury and served as director of the language schools, and their sons Christophe and Olivier were (and are) my contemporaries.

The idea that this entire family spoke French — a foreign language! — was something exotic and enticing. It seemed to give them access to worlds far beyond Middlebury, a town which is in many ways quite circumscribed.

I first attended the Middlebury French School in the summer of 1989. I was 14, and auditing. It was the summer before the Berlin Wall fell — I hadn't seen that coming and am not sure I understood the implications when it did — and it was also the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution, which we celebrated at the French School that summer with a pageant I slipped out of early, I recall, to watch the Spanish school's screening of Almodóvar's "Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown," a film I still love, full of the crazy energy that exploded in Spain in the decade after Franco's death.

Every evening after dinner that summer I'd ride my bike up to the language lab in Sunderland to sit in a dark booth listening to cassette tapes of French. Conjugating irregular verbs. Sorting out subject-adjective agreements. Learning the subjunctive in different tenses. *He wishes he were taller. You need to stop doing that. I would have come if I had been able to.* (I once told a friend I knew the subjunctive, which is often used to express doubt, in four different languages and he told me frankly he thought I'd be better off if I hadn't learned it in any.)

Back then the French method was Pierre Capretz's "French in Action," and I recall an early chapter featuring the "*dragueur*," kind of a pick-up artist or a man who hits on women — not at all PC, way before #MeToo, and also quite accurate in its depiction of French cultural norms at that time and probably even today. Sometimes I think textbooks, no matter how advanced, almost inescapably conform to stereotypes, even when they're out of step with other changes in the culture.

When later I began with Italian, an early chapter of the textbook *Prego* was “*Andiamo alla spiaggia,*” or “let’s go to the beach,” where we learned how to say *asciugamano*, or towel, and that a bar wasn’t necessarily where to order a beer but a place to drink espresso standing up.

When in college I began German (one of the languages I know least well), I recall an early chapter taught us, “*Ich bin Krank. Ich muß zum Arzt gehen,*” “I’m sick, I need to go to the doctor.” If I’d studied Russian, which I never have, maybe the first chapter would have been the Cyrillic alphabet and the second the immortality of the soul.

But those evenings in the language lab that summer and the following one were a strange combination of a consignment to a kind of prison, and a kind of liberation. In the darkness of the small booth — if I close my eyes I can still smell it — I was in total concentration. There were no distractions. No internet. Just grammar, and learning to listen, rewinding again and again and learning to hear in the stream of unfamiliar sounds where one word ended and the next began.

Learning to move my mouth in the new ways that French required. Learning a language, as you know, is a physical exercise as well as an intellectual one. As with playing a musical instrument, you need to develop an ear. And have discipline. And there in that dark booth, a world began to open. Somehow, by the end of the summer, after all the courses and conversations, and the in-jokes of the classes, somehow after all that, I could speak another language. French.

I went back to high school and felt different, as if I had access to something that eluded others. It was empowering and also isolating, as knowledge can often be.

Maybe you've also felt that way, returning from Middlebury at the end of these past summers. That every new course pushed you in unexpected new directions, changed you, widened your understanding, improved your mind.

I never would have imagined that I would put my French to such use — French in Action! — until I moved to Paris two decades later, as a reporter for *The New York Times*. I still live there, now as a correspondent for *The Atlantic*. Without that base from Middlebury, I would never have been able to settle in as well as I did, and immediately begin living and working and interviewing people in French. It slowly came back to me. We should all be so lucky to have studied so well so young! I think it's deeply encouraging to do something really difficult when you're young, since it makes it easier to tackle challenges later on.

Soon after French, I began to study Italian during high school at Middlebury, and I quickly fell hard. There was maybe the vague call of family history, but mostly I loved the sounds of the words. Italian is a beautiful language. At first Italian felt more immediate to me than French, but that was long before I learned baroque Italian bureaucratese, before I grasped how that language — like any language — can be deployed to obscure information rather than elucidate it.

When I was learning Italian it was around 1990-1992 and the entire political order in Italy was collapsing. I remember we had a handout on the Italian political situation that was almost immediately out of date because the old guard parties, the Christian Democrats and Socialists, had collapsed and the Communists post-1989 were splintering. It was in that political vacuum, by the way, that Silvio Berlusconi first came to power. Political orders come and go, especially in Italy, but Italian grammar pretty much stays the same.

Susan Sontag once said of the poet Joseph Brodsky that after he left Russia, he was at home “in Russian, but not in Russia.” And I think of this a lot. I lived and worked as a journalist in Italy for many years and Italy is my abiding intellectual preoccupation, but sometimes I think I’m more at home in Italian than I am in Italy. I’m grateful to have the choice but also a little mystified by it. Knowing many languages means the possibility of having many linguistic and even spiritual homes. It’s not the easy path and it can be quite confusing at times, but the rewards are very rich, as you language graduates and scholars know.

Language is also a form of power. I’ve told this anecdote before but I’ll tell it here again. Once when I was living in Rome after college, and not entirely confident in Italian, the gas pipe under my sink came out in my hand. I panicked a bit and called the 800 number and the man who answered said, “*bisogna girare la manopola,*” you need to turn the handle to turn off the gas. I had read the Divine Comedy and Eugenio Montale, but I didn’t know what a *manopola* was. What’s a *manopola*! I shouted into the phone. Sometimes not knowing a word can be a matter of life or death. I’ve never forgotten *manopola*. Words are important. Language is power.

And language of course is culture. I've lived and reported in Europe for the past decade and to my mind, one of the greatest challenges to the European project is the fact that so many languages are involved — it's very hard to get everyone on the same page. (Except in English.) The other huge challenge to Europe is that so many continental European countries (France, Italy, Germany) have a strong and enduring sense of national identity that makes it very difficult to accommodate newcomers. Britain is closer to the American multicultural model.

I've been struck by how in German, there's an entire vocabulary for people understood to have arrived from elsewhere. Foreigners. There are the *Gastarbeiter*, mostly Turks encouraged to come and work in the 60s and stayed, economic migrants, who are still called by that term, "guest workers" even though they've been "guests" now for several generations.

There are *Ausländer* (foreigners, which can have a negative connotation). There are *Flüchtlinge*, refugees, but the more acceptable term has shifted to *Geflüchtete*, literally people who have taken flight, apparently because the suffix "-ling," a diminutive, is seen as possibly pejorative. Recently the new term "*Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund*" or "people with migration backgrounds," has emerged, which is basically code for brown people from Africa, or arrivals from Eastern Europe or even the Balkans.

Then there are the various "*siedler*," which literally means "settler." *Umsiedler* and *Nachumsiedler* are people who came to what is now Germany's territory from the Baltic and some other areas during WWII. *Aussiedler* and *Spätaussiedler* are people who came to Germany from Eastern Europe and

Russia between the 60s and today. *Übersiedler* were East Germans who came to West Germany. (An *Einsiedler* is a hermit.)

With all those terms for “other,” maybe we can begin to understand how Germany, a country of 80 million people, was plunged into a political crisis when Chancellor Angela Merkel allowed in 1 million refugees from Syria and beyond in 2015. The vocabulary is a useful window. An elaborate taxonomy for otherness, for people who aren’t from these parts. That doesn’t mean that with time those foreigners can’t become locals, or that there’s not a sense of a shared identity or community or civic purpose, but I’d argue the vocabulary itself underscores the significant structural challenges to the endeavor.

I’ve also often thought that the key to understanding the European debt crisis is that Germany is the most powerful country in Europe and the German word for debt is *Schuld*, which is also the word for guilt. But that’s a whole other story.

So much for Europe. But what of the United States? I worry a lot about the current global political situation — I’m sure I’m not alone in this — and I fear that today’s intensifying isolationism will only exacerbate a turning inward, including in the U.S. Which cuts both ways, by the way. I see a kind of jingoistic nationalism on the right and an insistence on identity politics on the left. This turning inward intersects with other global trends, including a divide that’s less between left and right than between closed and open communities.

We all know the joke. What do you call someone who speaks three languages? Trilingual. Two languages? Bilingual. One language? American. *Bah-dum*.

According to [a recent study by the Modern Language Association](#), in the United States enrollments in language courses other than English dropped 9.2 percent between 2013 and 2016. The gains were in Japanese and Korean and the drop most dramatic in Italian, ancient Greek, Portuguese, Biblical Hebrew, and modern Hebrew. The Middlebury School of Hebrew is going against the current there. So are all the other Middlebury language schools.

The study also reported that the ratio of modern-language enrollments per 100 students in American colleges has been cut in half since 1960. That's probably because language requirements have been lifted in so many colleges. It seems that since 1960 we travel more, but learn fewer languages.

You, Middlebury Language School graduates, are bucking that trend — bravo to you! You've dedicated your lives to the study of languages — and also to teaching them. I imagine many of you are language teachers and have been asked at one point or another by potential students why they should learn another language. Why when there's Google translate? Why when you can stream TV from around the world on Netflix with subtitles? Why when everyone else in the world, thanks to YouTube and American culture, speaks English better than ever before?

And I was thinking how I'd respond to a student who didn't see the point. I think I'd say this: Because it gets you out of yourself and out of your own head and out of your own world and out of your own set of assumptions. Because it's hard, and it's good to push yourself when your brain is young and spongy. Why? Because if the postwar order as we know it is unraveling, then learning a language, today more than ever, is an act of resistance against isolationism. If

current developments are pushing the United States farther and farther away from meaningful links with the rest of the world, then it's up to all of you to push back against that, to do your own personal diplomacy.

That is no less true today than it was in 1915 when the Middlebury Language Schools were founded during First World War, a war that ended the 19th Century and began the 20th. When you graduates began studying at Middlebury just five years ago, the world looked quite different than it looks today.

Why study a language? Because it's an act of connection. It's best done in conversation with other human beings — “IRL,” or “in real life,” as my younger colleagues at *The Atlantic* write on Slack, the interoffice messaging system.

Why study a language? Because emoticons only go so far. Because language is power, language is culture, a new language is a new home — and because languages, as much as algorithms, are the connective tissue of the world.

And now I'll trade the subjunctive mood for the imperative. You, Middlebury Language School graduates, have worked so hard, you've mastered so much grammar and vocabulary, memorized so many characters, learned alphabets and idioms and irregular verbs, read widely and deeply, understood the jokes, examined the larger historical and philosophical contexts. Your brains must be on overdrive from the exertion!

But your efforts have given you a rare and precious power — the power of communication, the power of the knowledge of languages, the power of a belief in their importance.

Do not take that power for granted or squander it. Spread it. Especially at this moment in history — take it forth into the world, and encourage others to begin — or to continue — their language studies, too.

Congratulations again. May you go from strength to strength. Thank you for this honor and for the opportunity to address you.