

Good evening! I would like to start by thanking President Liebowitz, Vice President Geisler and everyone at the Middlebury Language Schools for this incredible invitation. To those of you receiving your degrees today, can I just say that I feel truly humbled to be standing in front of all of you talented linguists in this world-renowned institution. Congratulations! Mabrouk! Felicitations! Complimenti! Pozdravlayu! Zhou he nin!

I am tremendously flattered to be recognized here today as a journalist and as a linguist.

All of you are going to do very different things with your languages. But whether you want to be academics, ambassadors or artists, military leaders, journalists or entrepreneurs, trust me when I tell you that your languages are a precious passport and they can take you almost anywhere you want to go.

In the ten years since I started working as a journalist, I have lost count of the number of times my languages have helped me but I thought I would tell you about a couple of incidents that spring to mind.

In Urumqi, China, my crew and I were covering the riots between the Uighur Muslims and the Han Chinese. We happened upon a group of Chinese savagely beating a Uighur man. When the man managed to escape they turned their anger on us, determined to take our cameras and teach us a lesson. Just being able to tell the mob “please, we’re journalists, we’re Americans, excuse us, we didn’t see anything. Please there are police right there” was a huge bonus. It didn’t change their mind about whether they liked us or not but it bought us enough time to run like the wind for our car and get out of there.

About a year ago, I met a young Syrian child who had been badly injured when a shell hit her house, killing her pregnant mother and

all her siblings. This little girl was so fragile, so traumatized, so battered. I was extremely anxious about causing her any pain or frightening her. Being able to kneel by her bed and hold her hand and talk softly and gently to her in her own language at her own pace made the whole situation feel much less invasive and overwhelming... And of course being able to feel the searing immediacy of her responses because I understood them directly made the experience all the more profound...

In the field, speaking different languages has afforded me freedom, independence, confidence and a measure of protection... To be able to walk up to Russian soldiers perched atop their tanks on the front lines in Georgia and ask them why they were there and how long they planned to stay for... To be able to shout out a question in Arabic to the leader of Hamas at a press conference where I am the only American... To travel through Damascus undercover during the first months of the uprising, armed only with a head scarf... To know the moment when a group of people in a refugee camp have told everyone there that you are spies and not to be trusted... to demand a plainclothes policeman in Egypt show you his ID as he asks to see your footage.

Languages have opened doors for me but most importantly, they have opened my eyes.

Because above all, language is about receiving, receiving the key that unlocks the doors to different cultures. Whether it's through literature or poetry or song or conversation, languages teach us to listen. And I mean really listen, because they tell us so much more than the literal meaning of the words. They teach us about the history of places, about the dreams and frustrations of their peoples... they teach us how societies work, what people aspire to, how they understand beauty, truth, God...

We live in a global world now more than ever. A massacre happens in Syria and people in Pennsylvania know about it within a matter of hours thanks to YouTube and Twitter and Facebook. Information ripples across the globe in the beat of an eye. But this information is no good to us unless there are people out there who can understand it/ feel it/ interpret it/ explain it/ communicate...

In 2010, US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said that “to prosper economically and to improve relations with other countries, Americans need to read, speak and understand other languages.” Unfortunately, Duncan pointed out, only 18% of Americans speak a language other than English, compare that to 53% of Europeans who speak a second language. And it shows. I’m sure of most of you recall the recent famous US-Russian “reset” button debacle, though I really can’t blame anyone for confusing the words “peregruska” and “perezagruska” and the Russophiles among you know well just how complex and nuanced the Russian language is.

But the fact of the matter is that in many parts of the world, there is a perception that as Americans we don’t think we need to bother to learn languages, that we assume anybody who is important speaks English. And that feeds into an unfortunate reputation that America has for arrogance. We need to challenge those assumptions and show the world that we are listening... and we need to give them a better sense of who we are too. Government-sponsored Arabic or Russian or Chinese language campaigns are not enough. Real communication happens through people like you and me, through ordinary conversations we share with others on our travels about our families’, our lives, our ideals.

At its best language can be a tool that promotes an enhanced level of understanding of and communication with some of the different peoples who we share this planet with. It allows all of us to be diplomats. And with all of the turmoil and suffering and bloodshed

going on in the world and the enormous weight of responsibility that America carries as the leading superpower and defacto global policeman, I don't need to tell you just how important that is.

So I would ask you all to remember this, whether you plan to produce the next masterful translation of Tolstoy's War and Peace or whether you want to build clinics in rural China ... if you dream of bringing Mongolian throat singing to the US or American motorbikes to Mongolia... Your languages afford you a priceless insight into other worlds that we need more than ever to understand... So congratulations again - you have attained that precious passport, now it's time to go be diplomats.

Thank you.