2011 Spring Congregation Address

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Distinguished colleagues, honoured guests, members of the UBC graduating class of 2011.

Well, here you are. You've made it to graduation day. Congratulations!

While you graduates have been here at UBC, you have spent some time listening, like you are doing now: listening to lectures, listening to distinguished guest speakers, and to fellow students through the Terry Talks, and during class presentations. But I hope that you have spent even more time talking: discussing, debating, and challenging your professors and one another.

If there is one thing that a good education demands, promotes, fosters, and tries to perfect, it is the intelligent and sensitive use of language. Two things happened this year that prompted me to think more seriously about language.

First was a debate that arose over an article written in the *New Yorker* magazine by Malcolm Gladwell in which he argued that human ties created by social media are not strong enough to promote the solidarity required for social and political revolution. Second was an article published in *Maclean's* magazine that tried to make the case that Canada's two top universities – UBC and the University of Toronto – are facing a serious problem because our campuses are, as *Maclean's* suggested provocatively, "too Asian". These two events seem utterly disconnected, but they are not. Here's why.

Both controversies resulted from strong language masking sloppy thought, the sort of thing that I hope you graduates have been inoculated against.

More than three centuries ago, the great Enlightenment philosopher, John Locke warned that "[w]e should have a great fewer disputes in the world if words were taken for what they are, the signs of our ideas only, and not for things themselves." [i]

Locke was warning against the potential literalism of language, the belief that words are their own meaning; that they necessarily represent in themselves something true. In a remarkable collection called *Voces*, the Italian-Argentinean poet, Antonio Porchia offers this aphorism: "What words say does not last. The words last. Because words are always the same, and what they say is never the same."[ii]

Language is what we make of it, and we often make of it too little. We forget that language, what it represents, what it shapes in our thoughts, shifts with history, shifts with contexts, shifts with audience. This academic year, we saw two instructive examples of such shifts.

I mentioned that the first example emerges from a debate prompted by Malcom Gladwell's intentionally provocative assertion that the prophets of the new networked age vastly overstate the political importance of social networking.[iii] Gladwell argued specifically that the solidarity that underlay the American civil rights movement, the close personal ties that allowed activists to risk their safety and their lives for a cause, should not be analogized to the weak links formed through social networks like Facebook and Twitter.

Gladwell writes:

> The platforms of social media are built around weak ties. Twitter is a way of following (or being followed by) people you have never met.

> Facebook is a tool for efficiently managing your acquaintances…
> Social networks are effective at increasing *participation* – by
> lessening the level of motivation that participation requires.[iv]

Gladwell is partly right. Social media activists claim too much in suggesting a causal role for their tools in fomenting social action. The idea promoted by some US journalists that Twitter was somehow responsible for the brief uprising in Iran last year is ridiculous. The tweets that these journalists followed so assiduously were all from outside Iran, mostly in the US, and they were in English, not Farsi. Even the current uprisings in large parts of the Arab world are at best *facilitated* by the new social networking tools. As you thoughtful university graduates will undoubtedly intuit, to understand *cause* requires some appreciation of national, pan-Arab and colonial histories; a sense of economic, social and cultural context; and a view on the audience who can access social media – typically younger, perhaps disaffected, maybe with limited hope in their economic future.

But Gladwell is also guilty of loose thought and language. Because social media prophets use language that is too strong, he reacts similarly, suggesting that social networks are *inevitably* upholders of the status quo, that they can play no role in profound social change. The events of this past winter throughout the Middle East argue otherwise. True, social media did not create revolutionary moments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and elsewhere, but the ability to warn, to organize quickly, was relevant. That is why oppressive regimes throughout the world now routinely try to control, and sometimes even to shut down, the internet. As noted by social media commentator, Simon Mainwaring:

> [T]he courage of protesters… using social media is important because of the infinitely scalable connectivity it enables.
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> While Gladwell is right to assert that social media is largely used to exchange trivial information, it is a mistake to limit its transformative potential to the worst excesses of its current practice, denying that technology and the dynamics it enables will mature and grow along with its users, especially in dramatic circumstances such as the protests in Egypt. [v]

Gladwell is guilty of ahistoricism because he implies that the close social ties of the Arab street are irrelevant to the new networked age; but why shouldn't historically powerful networks of family and tribe be able to reposition their communications through the internet? Gladwell also fails to appreciate the changing context of a shifting age demographic in the Arab world, and evolving audiences whose sources of inspiration are transnational and not susceptible of governmental control.

My second example of linguistic inexactitude is much less subtle. In its issue of November 10th, 2010, *Maclean's* used strong language in its headline: "Too Asian?" [vi] The article contained an argument based almost entirely on anecdote, suggesting that lots of Caucasian students were choosing not to attend the University of Toronto and UBC because our campuses are filled with hyper-competitive students of Asian origin who make life hard for Caucasians who just want to have fun.

The language used neglected history: the historic mistreatment of Asian immigrants in Canada, exemplified by the Chinese head tax and the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. It

neglected context: the changing demographics of Canada, especially in the Lower Mainland of BC, where it is no surprise that a large percentage of UBC students have an Asian heritage. It neglected audience: I would expect that as a national newsmagazine like *Maclean's* would want to speak inclusively to an educated population that is more and more diverse, not to an imagined "core" of Caucasian readers.

By the way, as a male Caucasian myself, I took particular exception to the way my own demographic was caricatured: it seems that all that us white guys want to do at university is get drunk!

So here we see a case revealing everything that a university education argues against: ahistorical, anecdotal, un-analytical thought – expressed through sloppy and hurtful language.

Many philosophers of language have argued that language is one of the greatest shapers of thought; it may be that we cannot even think what we have no categories to express. This idea was captured succinctly by the great German novelist, Thomas Mann: "speech is itself a critique of life: it names, it characterizes, it passes judgment, in that it creates."[vii] Language is also, and obviously, a powerful tool of argument, a means to achieve one's own ends. But language is not abstract, is not isolated from the world in which it evolves. Words are always the same, and what they say is never the same. Language must be understood in particular histories, in contemporary contexts, and in the light of specific audiences.

I hope that your years in university have helped you graduates not only to listen well, but to speak well. To interpret and to use language not only as a projection of your own needs and desires, but as an authentic form of

what we really mean by communication. As you choose your words, think about history, think about context and think about your audience. If you do, there is far less chance of being sloppy and hurtful. What's more, you have the opportunity to make the world better through strong and careful language use intended to advance creative ideas.   Good luck to you all.

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[i] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: OUP, 2008).
[ii] Antonio Porchia, *Voces*, 1943, translated from Spanish by W.S. Merwin.
[iii] Malcolm Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted," online at http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell.
[iv] Gladwell.
[v] Simon Mainwaring, socialmediatoday.com/.../egypt-social-media-life-or-death-proposition
[vi] Re-titled, after much criticism of MacLean's, as "The Enrollment Controversy" online at http://www2.macleans.ca/2010/11/10/too-asian/3/.
[vii] Thomas Mann , "Speech," 22 January1929, Prussian Academy of Art, Berlin, repr. in *Essays of Three Decades* (1942).