Why Should Graduate Students in English Literature Know Foreign Languages?

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The following document is one that the author shares with master’s and doctoral students in his department to explain the rationale for English graduate programs’ foreign language requirement. Graduate students are perhaps not the only ones who are at times uncertain of the requirement’s value, and we offer the piece here for general discussion as well as practical adaptation. The ADE Bulletin welcomes the submission of other such practical documents related to teaching, assessment, governance, conflict negotiation, curricula, and so on.

—Doug Steward

A GENERATION ago the question of why graduate students should know a foreign language seldom arose. It was taken for granted that they should at least know some French, some Latin, and some Anglo-Saxon, or they could hardly know English, let alone English literature. Students no doubt grumbled, but the matter was scarcely debated by their professors. Now, it seems, the study of foreign languages has to justify itself. After all, it’s hard work, and not every good student has a gift for it. Weighed against the time and effort, the benefits of learning languages no longer seem obvious.

There is an inescapable larger context, needless to say, and that is the woeful command of foreign languages by American citizens in general, whose common attitude is well expressed in the story of a Kentucky school board. It was debating whether or not to allow the teaching of a foreign language in the high school, and the issue was settled when the chairman banged his fist down and said, “All I can say is, if English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it should be good enough for us!” I hope this anecdote is apocryphal. But a college student I met this summer in Quebec expressed surprise that American high schools still offer French, so little French had she heard on the lips of American
tourists. To call non-English languages foreign, too, as I have just done, is to reveal a bias, for the United States was never monoglot, even among the settlers, and today Spanish is the first language of millions of Americans.

But let’s set aside the question of what it behooves us as citizens to know when it comes to languages—Spanish? Chinese? Arabic?—and return to what we ought to know as students of English and American literature. For the master’s in literature, the University of New Hampshire, Durham (UNH), Department of English requires a “basic” or reasonably good reading knowledge of one language besides English; for the PhD it requires two, or “advanced proficiency” in one (“English”). The faculty has debated the requirements from time to time and made changes to them; they used to be stricter. At many universities, until recently, they were stricter still: a doctoral candidate had to qualify in two modern languages and one ancient one, as well as take a semester of Old or Middle English. At UNH students may fulfill the basic requirement by passing a course equivalent to the fourth term of a language or by passing an exam set by the department. Advanced proficiency is tested by a different sort of exam. Both exams test reading knowledge only; there is no requirement of oral fluency.

Why do we insist on this requirement? The reason uppermost in the minds of most professors is probably the need, from time to time, to read scholarly articles or books relevant to your study of British or American literature. In France, Germany, Italy, and many other countries, there is a great deal of scholarly publication in Anglistik, as the Germans call it, and some of it is interesting, useful, and untranslated. If a student is seriously interested in literary theory, moreover, French and German would be particularly useful, as such famous names as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Barthes, Heidegger, Gadamer, Adorno, and Habermas remind us. It is true that most of the works of these authors have been translated, but it has taken time and is still not complete, and it is often important to be able to consult the original; there are many younger theorists whose works have just begun to appear in English. And most professors, I think, would add that knowing the languages with the greatest influence on or closest kinship to English—French, Latin, and German—gives a person a leg up on understanding English vocabulary. Now let me add a few more considerations.
If you are concentrating on medieval or early modern English, it is important to know Latin, the lingua franca of educated Europe. If you are studying *Beowulf*, it is useful to know some Old Icelandic and Old High German as well as Old English. In 1066 French-speaking Normans conquered much of Britain, and the courts spoke French for centuries thereafter; Chaucer was a French poet as well as an English one. Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and many other Renaissance Italians were well known to English writers in the original.

Right up to the present day, most major authors in Britain, America, and the former British Empire have spoken, or at least read, more than one language. Latin was a requirement in all schools in Britain and America until about 1950, and most writers went to school. Shakespeare’s “small Latin” may have been fairly large, he seems to have read Italian, and he wrote a whole scene in (admittedly rather poor) French. Milton wrote poetry in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Italian as well as English and served as secretary for foreign tongues under Cromwell. Even Wordsworth, whom we think of as rooted in the Lake District, spent more than a year in France and a year in Germany, and he could not have escaped Cambridge without a lot of Latin. Nearly every educated or cultivated man and woman in England knew French. In her essay “On Not Knowing Greek,” Virginia Woolf shows that she knew quite a bit of it. Joyce, Eliot, and Pound all spoke or read half a dozen languages, and their works are famously polyglot. Beckett wrote some of his works in French first, then English. France was the resort of untold numbers of American writers, too, who sought greater depth of culture and artistic freedom. Hemingway lived in France, Spain, and especially Cuba. And, of course, many writers in America spoke Yiddish, Spanish, Chinese, or Japanese at home. Whether you need to know these languages to appreciate their work fully is debatable from case to case, but surely it is often a great help. And it should make you pause to ask why so many major anglophone writers took the trouble to acquire several other languages.

Though you can pass the basic language exams without quite feeling at home in the languages, it does not require much more effort to arrive at the point where you can read some primary literature in the original. If you feel inadequate before Dante or Proust in the original, that’s natural, but remember that translations are also inadequate, and
you may already be able to appreciate, for a page or two, some of the subtle nuances of meaning, the patterns of syntax, and the shapes of sound that resist transfer to a different language. It is a new literary experience, a particular effect you will find nowhere else. And, at the very least, you will be able to check a passage in translation that puzzles you against the original.

The unique aesthetic and semantic features of a language are in some respects most visible in poetry, where, for instance, the principles of meter vary a great deal. In Greek and Latin, what mattered most was quantity, the length of time one took saying a syllable, a long being the equivalent of two shorts, like a half note in music versus two quarter notes. So Horace’s ode 1.11 begins

Tu ne qua-e-sur-is, sci-se ne-fas, quem mi-hi, quem ti-bi
Fin-em di ded-er-int, Leu-co-no-e . . .

Do not ask, to know is forbidden, what for me, what for you
End the gods might have given, Leuconoe . . .

This meter is called the major asclepiadean, and it is based on the choriamb (−−−−) (long short short long), three per line. Horace cleverly gets several freestanding phrases or names into choriamb, such as “scire nefas” and the name of the girl he addresses, Leuconoe, and, best of all, in the final line, his most famous tag, “carpe diem.” These maneuvers not only add pleasure but also make parts of the poem memorable for its lapidary formulations.

Verse in the Romance languages is (or was until recently) based on the number of syllables per line, not on their length or stress (loudness). In Old English stress was paramount: a line had four heavily stressed syllables and anywhere from zero to about fifteen unstressed ones. Modern English and German combine syllable counting with stress patterns. All these features create very different musical worlds, apart from the little semantic effects the sounds generate. A monolingual reader will miss all these sources of interest and pleasure.

As for meanings, the effort of translating teaches rich lessons. Here is a small example from the French poet Alfred de Musset’s long poem about how he felt after reading the Italian poet Leopardi, though he probably read him in Sainte-Beuve’s translation. Musset’s poem ends:
The final hour came, which you so often summoned. 
You saw it come, without remorse and without fear, 
And you could taste at last the charm of death.

The final phrase is in italics in the original (almost a typographical pun itself)—charme de la mort—to show that it is quoted. The English charm, though it is the almost inevitable word here, is not quite the same as the French charme, especially in the formal poetry of nearly two centuries ago, where it often had a deeper sense of enchantment, of irresistible attraction. That the word for “death” is feminine in French nudges the meaning a little toward the idea of a femme fatale, as if Leopardi is longing for a paramour. And indeed the original poem by Leopardi that Musset is quoting, “Amore e morte,” makes this connection explicit, especially at the end, where the poet longs to rest his head on death’s “virgin breast.” So charme, which was on every Frenchman’s lips when he met a woman, is not inappropriate. Yet I think Sainte-Beuve was translating a phrase in Leopardi’s poem, gentilezza del morir, for which charme is inadequate. The Italian gentilezza might be translated with the cognate “gentleness” or with “kindness,” and in French with douceur or bonté, but it carries a long semantic history, some of which was still active in Leopardi’s day. We see something similar in English with the word gentleman, which still retains something of its aura of social class, and with gentile, referring to the non-Jewish “nations” or pagans, from the Latin gens, which meant “clan,” “tribe,” or “nation.” In Italian love sonnets, at least as early as Petrarch, the lady is often gentile, the meaning of which ranges from “noble” to “kind”; charm could come into it, but quite secondarily. The French gentillesse is the exact cognate of gentilezza, but it may have had pejorative connotations, according to my dictionary, such as “prettiness,” or even “pretty trick,” with a sexual slant. I am not sure what Sainte-Beuve should have done, but I would be tempted to translate gentilezza into English as “noble grace,” conveying the idea that death, still feminine, graciously grants out of noblesse oblige the peace a lover longs for. A striking alternative might be “courtesy”: “you could taste at last the courtesy of death.” I may be mistaken about some of these nuances, but the point is that burrowing into a foreign language (or two) not only reveals subtleties about, in this instance, the relation of
love and death but also teaches us something about what can and cannot be said in English.

The famous opening line of *Ulysses*, indeed the very first word, has an ambiguity that I never noticed until I read a book about translations of the novel into other languages. “Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead,” it begins. I had always assumed that “stately” was an adjective, in parallel with “plump,” a witty collocation, and rather like a pair of Homeric epithets, fitting for a book based on the *Odyssey*. But it could be taken as an adverb, implying that Buck is acting in a stately manner at the moment as he comes from the stairhead (he is pretending to be a priest), and not that he is always stately (as he is always plump) the way Achilles is always swift-footed. A translator into most European languages, however, must make a decision: Is it to be rendered (in French) *majestueux* (adjective) or *majestueusement* (adverb)? In English the grammatical ambiguity is built in; in many other languages it must be resolved; and the loss of ambiguity is a slight change of meaning. I now feel a little tremor of uneasiness as I read the opening sentence (though it is nothing to what I feel later on!), and I owe it to seeing the passage through the lenses of other languages.

One result, then, of studying a foreign language is to see your own language, at least for moments, as foreign. The experience is interesting, a little like the estrangement that comes from repeating a word until it sounds meaningless. And this experience is a large step toward understanding English better. You can also gain this sense by taking a course in linguistics. To see how Noam Chomsky and his followers elegantly formulate the English verb structure is a revelation, as is the demonstration that English and Japanese are mirror images of each other in their syntax. Or why it is that the preferred position of certain adverbs in French (immediately after the verb) is usually the one position they cannot occupy in English: “Il pense souvent à la France” cannot be rendered word for word as “He thinks often of France”; “often” wants to go before the verb, or perhaps at the end of the sentence, but “souvent” may not go to either position. If to see yourself as others see you is a virtue, then surely it is also a virtue to see your language as others see it, as something new, strange, and far from inevitable. It is an important step toward freeing yourself from certain assumptions, conceptions, and even ideologies which had seemed natural.
These are my own opinions, and other professors in our department will put the case differently. But we all want you to plunge in, please, and learn to swim a little in a sea other than English.

Works Cited
