

Editor's Column: Where Were We?

MY TITLE REFERS, FIRST, TO THAT FAMILIAR MOMENT IN a conversation when the interlocutors attempt to resume their exchange after an interruption necessitates a reestablishment of the communicative channel through an appeal to what Roman Jakobson, following Bronislaw Malinowski, called the phatic function—that is, the elements of the conversation whose purpose is to test the communication conduit. The title also alludes to that moment when one of the interlocutors, having drifted away absentmindedly, distracted by other concerns, tries to retake the thread of the conversation, which has continued for a while without his or her attention or contribution. We have all experienced these situations and know that a great deal of anxiety is associated with them. Aside from the embarrassment caused by our inattention, we always feel pressure to be the first one to identify the precise topic we were dealing with when communicative disaster struck, as if this small triumph would prove that we were paying attention all along. But the anxiety derives also from the unsettling possibility that we may not be able to pick up the thread where we left it, that in the intervening seconds of the interruption the world may have changed forever, that the original context we are trying desperately to recover may be lost for good, that the “where” in “where were we?” may have become a non-place, and . . . “Who is this person in front of me, anyway?”

On 12–14 April 2002, the Conference on the Relation between English and Foreign Languages in the Academy took place in New York, sponsored by the Modern Language Association and New York

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University. Most of the papers from that meeting, a first attempt to identify the myriad ramifications of the problem announced in the conference title, are reproduced in this issue of *PMLA*. The conference was clearly articulated around the metaphor of a conversation. There has been, of course, a watchful coexistence between departments of English and those of foreign languages in American academia for as long as there have been departments of English and of foreign languages. But if we wish to posit that there has been an ongoing conversation between these two interlocutors, we have to concede at least that it has been punctuated by extended periods of distraction in which the attention one owed to the other and to the communication channel was somewhere else. I would propose that in the drift away from the acknowledgment of the other, in those extended moments of inattention to the conversation, departments of English and departments of foreign languages in the American academy learned something about themselves that has renewed their commitment to engage in a meaningful dialogue. For it may be profitable to ask why a situation that does not seem to have bothered anyone for many years has now become visible, as it were, and is deemed, at this precise moment, to require our undivided attention and a concerted search for solutions. Why do both interlocutors appear in these pages now, publicly renewing their pact to ensure that their conversation is not interrupted and that neither of them drifts away again?

As a participant in this conference, I was surprised to learn from a speaker of a new acronym in vogue among deans and other university administrators: LOTS (languages other than Spanish). The exceptionalism of Spanish as a foreign language in the American academy is a significant development that arises from the inappropriateness of applying the label *foreign* to that language. The professionalization of the undergraduate body and the related devaluation of the bachelor's degree—the fact that the BA is now merely a stepping-stone toward the professional

degree students need to maintain or raise their standard of living—as well as the demographic realities of this country, have combined to make Spanish the dominant foreign language department in American universities, thereby changing the institutional station of those of us who teach it. As a result of our new lot, funds, positions, and all sorts of perks are flowing our way. Departments of Spanish are about to spill—if they have not already spilled—out of the category of foreign languages in American academia. In fact, the key issue that departments of Spanish in the American milieu will face in the short term is their change in status to something resembling departments of a second national language and culture, a conversion that will require a novel way of thinking and acting in this academic context. I am not proposing that Spanish will be a codominant linguistic or cultural reality in the United States anytime soon. But this secondariness, this almost-mainstream nature (as opposed to the firmly peripheral essence of foreign language departments), increasingly thrust on Spanish departments, must be theorized in all its implications if we are to enter into new conversations in our institutions. One can see in our present circumstance several indications of how the category of the secondary—of being almost mainstream—is key to understanding our new location. But, more important, the hybrid situation of contemporary Spanish departments, midway between a foreign language and a minor national language, is consequential in that it puts in check the consistency of the local-foreign divide on which the relation between departments of English and those of foreign languages is constructed. The current institutionally intractable status of departments of Spanish alerts us to the subtle yet inescapable dissolution of the categories and conceits that have defined the boundaries between English and foreign languages in the American university and is a symptom of the reasons that the interlocutors need and want to open a meaningful dialogue now.

The idea that departments of English have entered a crisis has been bandied around for so

long that the sense of crisis has abated—after all, it is hard to live in a day-to-day crisis for years without its becoming a form of normalcy. Most English departments have struggled with the realization that they, like law firms, are an aggregate of various discontinuous critical “practices”: fairly heterogeneous groups with diverse interests and templates that nonetheless work under a larger corporate entity that provides infrastructural support. This situation, difficult as it may be for the setting of long-term goals and for the articulation of a common project, has nevertheless led to a profound insight. The current atomization of departments of English proves that the principal conceit of traditional philology was wrong: the sum of all the discrete interpretive efforts plied on the literary monuments of a culture defined by a homogeneous linguistic horizon does not necessarily yield the silhouette of a spiritual monad residing within that culture’s national boundaries.

In other words, departments of English have been forced to discover in themselves the radical heterogeneity and otherness that they have historically and institutionally projected onto foreign languages, irrespective of whether the latter were bound in a single department. They have learned that their avowed linguistic consistency and homogeneity actually conceal a Babel as unsettling as the linguistic heterogeneity that God visited on humanity in the biblical story. Scholars in departments of English speak the same language yet cannot “understand” one another. They have discovered that, to be a truly national language department, they have had to encompass a multitude of other voices that, although speaking the same language, represent perspectives irreducible to the philological chimeras of the national spirit or soul. The inclusion of Latino studies, queer theory, African American and Asian American literature, film and performance studies, and Caribbean and post-colonial studies in departments of English has changed forever the category of national literature. I would argue that it is from the per-

spective gained from this contradictory self-knowledge that departments of English can engage in a meaningful conversation with their counterparts in foreign languages.

Conversely, while distracted solipsistically from their conversation with English as a discipline, departments of foreign languages have been forced to confront the fact that their differences from one another have been the perfect disguise for a fundamental similarity among them. For even if they might not be able to communicate with one another or have remained isolated from one another, they are, and have been all along, *foreign* languages, united by and in their foreignness—a foreignness that has been imposed on them institutionally by the American academy but that they have also studiously reinforced by articulating their curricula and institutional identities through philological conceits about the organic relation among language, literature, and territory. They have been speaking the same foreign language—the language of foreignness—to their colleagues in the English department but also to their institutions and to the academy at large. More precisely, the self-knowledge that departments of foreign languages have been forced to acquire of late reveals that their relations with their institutions and students have always been mediated by an instrumentality that is the mark of their foreignness, inasmuch as that instrumentality determines their distance from the putative center of the university, a distance that varies over time. This explains why enrollments in German, Russian, Japanese, and so on, have seen a historical ebb and flow and why Spanish is peaking. The cold war produced higher enrollments in Russian, and in the early eighties a seemingly incontestable belief that Germany and Japan were going to be two vertices, along with the United States, of a trilateral world economy fueled a rise in the number of students studying those nations’ languages. Spanish similarly saw its first significant increases as a result of the interest (and anxiety) produced in this country by the Cuban revolution

and the ensuing insurgency in much of Latin America. Instrumentality is also behind the present surge in Spanish, to the extent that the flood of students wishing to become proficient in that language arises from the perception that there is a sizable national market of Spanish speakers, toward which students feel they must position themselves advantageously. The instrumentality associated with French traditionally was of a different sort: knowledge of French was supposed to endow the speaker with a sophistication that could open doors to culture, a category supposedly disinterested but concealing a practicality of its own. Historically, in American universities the foreignness of foreign languages has dictated a purely instrumental perception of them. With the recent professionalization of higher education (which has benefitted only Spanish) and a globalization that is increasingly seen as English-driven (and that therefore appears to make increasingly moot the traditional reasons for learning a foreign language), that perception has translated into the drop in enrollments characteristic of the last ten years. How long can departments of foreign languages survive if their clientele is guaranteed only by the existence of a language requirement in liberal arts curricula?

What departments of foreign languages bring to a possible conversation with departments of English is another revision—now from the other side of the divide—of the concept of national culture, one that will allow them to escape the dead end of speaking *foreign*, or *in foreign*, of performing foreignness to an American audience (and I use *performing* with all its theatrical connotations). The first objective of all foreign language departments should be to challenge the presumed organicity of the “home” national cultures that they represent metonymically in the American academy, a lesson that can be gleaned from studying the ways in which departments of English have incorporated a fundamental heterogeneity. Curricula should be revised to challenge to the core the powerful fantasy of a homogeneous national language and

culture—that mirage with which we have tried to seduce our students by promising that if they learn the languages and literatures we teach, they will achieve transparent access to the Mind of an Other. When depicting to our students the national culture we address, for instance, we must show its representative achievements but also the sutures, compromises, and exclusions that had to take place for them to become representative. When selecting a locale for a program abroad, we should seriously consider a peripheral city rather than the metropolitan capital, with the understanding that the centrality lost will be compensated for by the insights gained from a regional perspective. The possibilities in this regard are only limited by the rigor with which the entire exercise is undertaken.

Equally important, departments of foreign languages must displace the nation they represent from its metropolis to encompass the presence of that national reality in the United States. Indeed, there is hardly any foreign language department that cannot identify a sizable community of nationals in this country with which it can establish a relation that can be imported into the classroom in varied ways, even if that community lives far away—talk about creative uses of the new technologies in our classrooms. To understand the national as residing here as well as in the home metropolis will allow for the further dismantling of the foreignness of foreign languages and may make possible a real conversation between departments of English and departments of foreign languages.

All indications suggest that a number of foreign language departments are engaged in wrenching and rewarding discussions that may lead to necessary change. But this transformation will not take place unless what may seem insurmountable difficulties are confronted. In a fascinating article that addresses some of these issues, Claire Kramsch has put it succinctly:

Institutional challenges arise at the boundary of departmental structures. Foreign language de-

partments might reasonably fear losing their national *raison d'être* if German, for example, serves only as a catalyst for self-exploration or as an illustration of language use but not primarily to get to know the Germans and their culture. How can we then justify the existence of German, Spanish, or Russian departments on our campuses? As the boundaries of nation-states are under revision in a global world, so too the boundaries of national language departments are under scrutiny. (14)

I would answer that departments of foreign languages have nothing to fear if they conceive their pedagogical mission as representing cultural difference as opposed to foreignness. This difference should be one that is knowable through the critical and epistemological tools and the decentered, multilayered, and strident sense of culture that students have or will ac-

quire in, for instance, their English courses, even if the vehicle and content of the departments' teaching are manifestly different from—yet not radically discontinuous with—that disjointed sense of culture. If departments of foreign languages remain attached to the concept of a totality that sustains their foreign status, they will succeed at preserving their *raison d'être*, but the alarming declines in enrollments they have been experiencing for years will continue unabated.

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WORK CITED

Kramsch, Claire. "Language and Culture: A Social Semiotic Perspective." *ADFL Bulletin* 33.2 (2002): 8–15.