Imagining Otherwise: Rethinking Departments of Foreign Languages and Literatures as Departments of Cross-Cultural Difference

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The past decade has seen a steady move to rethink departments of foreign languages and literatures as departments of cultural studies. Though there has been some resistance to this trend, a general openness to it has been manifested in the way departments have renamed themselves, moving from departments of languages and literatures to departments, for example, of German studies or of French studies, indicating, at least superficially and at times more substantively, that multiple aspects of culture, both popular and high, literary and nonliterary, have now become legitimate objects of academic study and research.

The question I would like to initially pose in this article is, despite these shifts, how much has actually changed? For though our course offerings may now include a wider variety of texts and topics that are neither exclusively literary nor monocultural and though we may choose a language textbook that provides more cultural information and a newly added chapter on cultural differences, these changes have been primarily additive. Though the object of our focus has shifted and become more differentiated—a welcome and productive change indeed—the structures that guide the endeavor have remained mostly unchanged. One could say that we have poured new wine into old wineskins. The problem, I believe, is that we have created departments of cultural studies instead of departments of cross-cultural studies and have thereby overlooked, perhaps unintentionally but nonetheless in a somewhat colonialist, anthropologically outdated fashion, the dialogical processes by which both the self and other are constructed through the cross-cultural encounter with difference.

Given my research interests in psychoanalysis, I would first like to consider some of the underlying processes—what one might call the “reveal codes”—operative in several sites within departments of foreign languages and literatures to show how issues of cross-cultural travel and responses to difference are present but go largely unexplored. Drawing on psychoanalytic, feminist, and postcolonial theory, I then suggest some initial changes we could make to rethink departments of foreign languages and literatures as what I would like provisionally to call departments of cross-cultural difference.

I begin with the initial stages of foreign language study, with the foreign language classroom and an image that dramatically depicts a relationship of self and other that often underlies and drives this setting but goes largely undiscussed and unexamined by teachers and students alike (see illus.). Though the picture is, of course, exaggerated, it portrays quite well one of the rather unconscious yet nonetheless operative desires of the foreign language classroom: the desire to identify with and to “pass” as the other. In fact, I think one could safely say that the foreign language classroom is one of the few sites on a college campus left substantially untainted by postmodernism in that it is a site where the pursuit of a constructed ideal, of paradise embodied by the native speaker and native speaker fluency is not only sanctioned but rewarded (Kramsch, “Wem gehört”). Indeed, the identity fostered in the foreign language classroom is rarely that of a subject consciously moving between and defined by two

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or more cultures but, rather, that of a subject who is taking on one culture and discarding another. In this model of mimesis and assimilation, any residual of the original identity, in the form, for example, of code switching or an accent, is generally viewed as undesirable and abject. This desire to reincarnate oneself as a new subject and to move out of one culture and into another receives implicit support from such popular theories of second language acquisition as the Natural Approach, whose point of departure is predicated, I would argue, on the fantasy of a return to origins. For in its equation of first and second language learning, Stephen Krashen’s theory of the Natural Approach returns the adult subject to a prelinguistic, pre-subject position where, according to psychoanalytic theory, all vestiges of differences are erased (Krashen and Terrell).

Another example of a site where significant opportunities for the conscious exploration of responses to difference are lost is the study-abroad experience. As with the foreign language classroom, reactions to difference are not necessarily unidimensional but are more often than not mixed or ambivalent. I recall all too well, and now with considerable embarrassment, my own unconscious assimilationist yearnings in my first year abroad, desiring to cloak myself in Austrian identity through the form of Austrian garb. The Austrian Lodenmantel that I proudly wore for several years and the hiking boots I brought back attest to that desire to don the identity of the foreign, to reconstruct myself as the image of the other. I also recall vividly several of my fellow study-abroad classmates, who often seemed to respond with disdain to that which was different, finding fault with that which was foreign, needing to keep at bay what they had constructed as abject and other. These tendencies of exoticizing or repelling alterity differ from person to person and co-exist within any one psyche, and most people involved in foreign language study can recall the complex and often mixed responses to difference that characterized their foreign language learning process and of course many other life experiences where one becomes caught in the snare of desiring to identify with or to abject the other.

The third and final site I would like to touch on is the space of the undergraduate or graduate seminar in literature or culture. Here two different types of colonialist assumptions seem to be at play: either that the transformation into the mature, native speaker is complete or that differences simply do not matter, that is, the other is assumed to be just like oneself. For there is no mention of or reference to the different cultural backgrounds we bring to the classroom. That we might be, for example, students of varying cultural, ethnic, and class backgrounds in the late twentieth century reading texts of German writers from the eighteenth is never brought into the discussion, though our readings and textual interpretations are most assuredly marked by these issues. Though recently some attention has been given to the fact that these are North American departments of, for example, German studies—I am thinking here of MLA panels and other conferences over the past few years that have addressed this topic—there does not seem to be a great deal of attention within the everyday teaching and research practices of foreign language departments to the omnipresent cross-cultural differences that exist in the classroom and inform the interpretations of texts and the construction of an intercultural site of exchange in the seminar setting.

Though the dynamics of cross-cultural travel and the encounter with difference have long since been the topic of much sophisticated research in anthropology and in feminist, postcolonial, and psychoanalytic theory and though we have become adept at adding these theoretical texts to the syllabi of our upper-division and graduate courses, these same theoretical contributions are rarely used to productively reflect on the way we cross cultures and encounter difference in the teaching and study of foreign languages, literatures, and cultures. With this in mind, how might we imagine departments of foreign languages and literatures otherwise, as sites of cross-cultural difference?
In general, I would suggest that the nature and structure of foreign language departments be viewed not as static but as an ongoing self-reflexive process that, in the spirit of Julia Kristeva’s subject-in-process, puts itself on trial, making itself other to itself, seeing itself from the metadistance of a Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt and catching itself in and working to revise its own colonialist desires and identifications. To do this, a department of cross-cultural difference would incorporate the conscious exploration of how one crosses cultures into the heart of the department’s “mission” and into the various areas of teaching and research in which it engages.

From the outset, a standard component of language study would be to give students the opportunity to reflect on cross-linguistic and cross-cultural travel and how they and others engage in and are transformed by that process. One might consider, for example, adding texts to the syllabus in first-year language classes that thematize this process, texts such as Alice Kaplan’s memoir French Lessons, Eva Hoffman’s Lost in Translation, or Josef Breuer’s case study of Anna O., which address issues such as the desire to identify with or fetishize the foreign, the resistance to difference, and other aspects of subject formation through the encounter with otherness (Breuer and Freud 21–47).

Along these same lines, one could explore with students the development of a cross-cultural consciousness through the study of foreign languages by reading with students Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa’s work Borderlands / La Frontera and considering how her concept of “the new Mestiza” could serve as a model for the development of a new type of critical consciousness formed in the dialogical space created between cultures. Students could be asked to reflect on the significant differences in the cross-cultural experience of a Chicana living in the Mexican American borderlands and the temporary, self-imposed marginality of the foreign language classroom.

To do this, departments might create a new structure for beginning language classes, in which an additional weekly meeting section or a required concurrent course could provide a forum for the discussion of these texts so that the time devoted to cross-cultural, reflective language instruction would not be impaired on.

Perhaps in the second year of language study, teachers could introduce texts from feminist, colonial, and postcolonial theory that describe the negotiation of self and other in the process of traveling to other cultures. Texts such as Edward Said’s Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism and Mary Louise Pratt’s Imperial Eyes on the representation of self and other in the colonial discourse of travel literature could shed light on the complex dynamics and displace desires at play in “traveling” to other cultures within the context of foreign language study. Contrasting the colonial construction of self and other with the dialogically based notion of “world traveling” formulated by the feminist scholar Maria Lugones could enable students to understand these two fundamentally distinct approaches to difference, and students could thus be encouraged to question their response to the foreign culture: are they Americanizing or fetishizing the foreign, do they feel “colonized” by it, or are they consciously attempting to foster a self-reflexive dialogue between cultures?

These curricular changes would be coupled with revised approaches to day-to-day classroom activities in the foreign language classroom that would be similarly more reflective. In this scenario, students would become not talking heads in “frenetically paced” classrooms (Marks 3) but, rather, cross-cultural and cross-linguistic ethnographers in the contemplative process of applied difference.

In addition, the undergraduate major would include required core courses in travel literature and theory, cross-cultural psychology, ethnographic fieldwork, and discourse analysis, courses that would also offer students rigorous and productive preparation for study-abroad programs.

Other courses in the major that focus on literature, language, or culture would be self-reflexive concerning the intercultural dynamics that characterize the space of the classroom. The crossing of cultures might, for example, be made more explicit by courses team-taught by a native and nonnative speaker, where differences in textual interpretation could then be put in dialogue with each other and explored.

Perhaps the most fundamental change in departments of foreign languages, literatures, and cultures would be the manner in which graduate students would be prepared for and would view teaching. Language courses would be seen as cultural studies enabling us to finally put to rest the false dichotomy of language versus literature that has plagued departments of foreign languages and marked language teaching as the abject other. Rigorous preparation in the practical and theoretical aspects of teaching language, literature, and culture would be ongoing in each semester of teaching and would be seen as an integrated component of the graduate program rather than as a detraction from progress to degree. Viewing foreign language departments as sites of cross-cultural travel would also lead us to cross intradepartmental cultures and foster dialogues between research in applied linguistics and second language acquisition on the one hand and literary and cultural studies on the other. As I have described elsewhere in greater detail (“Subjects-in-Process”), seminars that prepare graduate students for teaching might, for example, put Brecht’s notion of Verfremdung in dialogue with Krashen’s theory of the Natural Approach to explore issues of mimesis and identification in second language acquisition. In addition, the homogenization or erasure of difference that may be unconsciously at play in foreign language teaching and learning could be productively explored with TAs through discourses such as feminism (Kramsch and von Hoene) and postcolonial theory (von Hoene) that have demonstrated a vigilant concern with bringing forth differences both within subjects and in any given culture. Kramsch’s notion of a “third place”
In the process of second language study. It is perhaps one of the most potentially productive theoretical discourses for a reconsideration of foreign language study as cross-cultural difference. Undergraduates and TAs alike might consider reading Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* as a point of departure for reflection on how these issues are implicated in an ongoing displacement and reconstitution of identity.

Bringing critical theory together with second language acquisition, graduate students might also be asked to put Jürgen Habermas’s notion of communicative competence in dialogue with Sandra Savignon’s application of the concept to second language acquisition. In so doing, students might consider how the encounter with a different language plays in the construction and revision of subjectivity. Krashen and Terrell’s *The Natural Approach: Language in the Classroom* could serve as a useful theoretical resource for this process.

In summary, the contributions departments of foreign languages and literatures can make both to the university and to society in terms of how we encounter and respond to cultural differences have been underexplored and underutilized. Rethinking departments of foreign languages and literatures as sites of self-reflexive cross-cultural travel or applied difference can enable us to see the significant contribution that such departments can make in defining ethnic studies as a cross-cultural, international project. At a time when departments of foreign languages and literatures are attempting to negotiate identities within an increasingly corporate and culturally affirmative model of higher education (Hohendahl), a vigilant attentiveness to critical perspectives that bring forth rather than squelch differences becomes ever more crucial.

**Works Cited**


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