

TRANSLATION AS A WATCHWORD

Translation.

Information from the OECD reveals that the second highest budget item for the European Union is Translation. Second only to that of Agriculture ! In short, there are jobs out there, and « out there » would include the whole wide world. This demand for translators should be good news to foreign language departments. Professional translation requires the sound knowledge of at least one language not one's own. Only, somehow the word has not gotten out. Recruiters should be stressing the need. They should be proposing the career of translator as a rewarding one. Foreign Language departments could help to bring pressure to bear on the recruiters, examining what recruiters say to new students, and suggesting added persuasive arguments.

Trouble was already brewing in 1950. Returning veterans were bristling with new ideas, particularly in the public universities. One such basic idea was to democratize the educational system. The public university systems' stated goal was to teach students democracy. Yet the very structure of the system was at its root autocratic. The returnees back on the job decided to take steps to abolish the system. They established elected senates from among the faculty to represent said faculty. Subsequently, during the decade, the threatened administrations co-opted the senate structure by heaping administrative tasks and committees on its members in such a way as to smother any initiatives. At the same time it increased the size of its own staff. The defeat seems far from Foreign Language Problems, but it had its repercussions.

One result of the offensive was for administration to present itself as a corporation. It considered education as a business and worse, a manufacturing business with students being turned out like pairs of shoes. Education would be measured by the number of jobs students would find on graduation. Career orientation took the ascendancy over learning for learning's sake or for the appreciation of culture.

Now, these developments didn't have to lead to the domination of the practical over the ideal. The way a corporation should be run, after all, is by developing new ideas. These ideas can come from any level in the organization : top, middle or bottom. It may indeed start with ideas hatched by the executive, then passed on to middle management and thence to the workers. In a well-run corporation, the reaction by the workers is passed back up through middle management and up to the executive. Innovation, however, might well

originate at either of the other two levels. Moreover, the feedback from the bottom to the top must be done not by yearly reports which no one reads, but by direct contact, basic contact by off the cuff chatting, top brass visiting on and off the job with the lower levels.

One of the vices of the corporate system was to set itself up as an adversary to the faculty. The system waged war on its powerless enemy. It divided faculty against itself. It devised « super-professorships » awarded to certain individuals. They fostered, and still do foster, jealousy and morale breakdown among the troops. It rewarded individual professors who found grants for « improvement of teaching, » or gave « merit raises » thus implying that, since teachers could improve, the present faculty was in some way of inferior quality. Unfortunately naïve instructors have taken the bait. They compete against each other. It is my personal contention that teaching quality cannot be judged. Not that there isn't a criterion for judgment, but on the contrary that there are so many criteria that none has validity. Rewarding individuals was also a simple way of cutting labor costs. Across the board salary increases were discouraged.

Corporate structure functioning in accordance with the rules for good administration could well have headed off any agitation for democratization. So the agitation continues. After a good decade of senate subserviance, things began to change in the 1970's. Department chairs were less automatically appointed, but elected in each department by its members. In the 1980's election of deans made a few baby steps. In a few years, provosts and presidents may also be chosen by each faculty and perhaps one day even the chancellor of the New York State system will be chosen from among the faculties and no longer be politically appointed. Then the tide may change, with career orientation and learning for learnings sake be on an equal footing.

The ground swell was working against Foreign Language study, but other forces were working against us as well. Since 1950, the stance of foreign language study has been one of defense. Before World War II, our status had already begun a decline, but either no one noticed or we just refused to admit it. Events had caught up with us. In the earlier years of the 20th century, there was a myth that study of foreign language was the sign of a kind of nebulous « upper class. » Elitism was acceptable. It wasn't until 1968 that the veil was torn. The game was up. Still we refused to admit it. Heretofore, four, then three years of foreign language had been prerequisite to college entry. The bar was lowered. If a candidate didn't have those years, he could « make it up » by two years of study (or worse « to the two-year level ») in college. Soon it was commonly accepted that foreign language was a « requirement. » Then it was a requirement solely for the B.A. degree. The reason for this distinction goes back

to a Harvard decision earlier in the century, when the B.S. was created. The history behind this decision doesn't concern us here. We had the « requirement . » We were safe. In 1968 the question was posed anew : requirement for what ? We were in the same basket as swimming. The two requirements for graduation had no *raison d'être*.

We began scrambling for answers to account for our existence. We tried many creative gimmicks, but all to no avail. I, for instance, changed our department name from Foreign Language to International Communication and Culture in a vain attempt to show the academic community that language was culture and communication. The community remained icily unconvinced. We developed courses pertinent to «new realities» : business French, commercial Spanish, industrial German. No go. We tried to attract majors in other areas : physical education, film, even a new one, called « Communications ! »

At the same time, we failed to notice that other requirements were surviving . Mathematics was a prerequisite for Physics. Physics and chemistry were prerequisites for Engineering. The ghost returned. We were a requirement for what ? Various liberal arts majors could have required Foreign Language for their discipline. We failed to ask them. They didn't oblige. They could have.

Still, all that would have been artificial, a stop gap. In the meantime another force was operating which many ignored. Here is a case far removed from Foreign Language. A friend reports that in a class some years ago in Physical Chemistry, he did surprisingly well. Chemistry was not even his major, but he aced the exam. He went to see his professor, who said to him, « You did very well. But you realize that in a year you will have forgotten all you learned to pass the exam. » The student was puzzled. The professor explained, « What you have learned is how to think. »

« How to think ! » Everyone talks about that, but we all mean something different. What his professor was saying was that the student had tapped an underlying current which had more permanence than the subject matter. The current was made up of subjacent factors. These are the hope of all instructors in all disciplines ; namely, that the student will retain certain undefined matter or attributes that transcend the course material. Foreign language professors experience the same feeling as the physical chemistry professor. Even first and second year language courses can produce something that the student carries away with him after grammar and pronunciation have long since faded into oblivion. The lesson is that no matter about how or what you teach there is this phenomenon of residual memory.

Now, for us in Foreign Language the lesson would be to define the subjacent factors that students might retain long after their university language courses, not to mention our advanced courses that follow. This is possible, as you will read below.

There is one final barrier to attempts at stopping the decline of foreign language study that deserves mention. Particularly nagging is the misperception of our discipline by instructors in other academic departments. They think of Foreign Language as a high-school course being taught in their superior midst. The misperception may well be in part our own fault. We accepted a fiction; namely, that two years of high school foreign language study was equal to one year of college work. Some course compressed into shorter time. Preparation for a summer in Paris, Madrid or Berlin. We didn't try to project ourselves as an academically dignified (or stuffy) sector. It is not too late. We might explore that subjacent area mentioned by the physical chemistry professor.

We might explore the possibility of establishing a department list of subjacent elements that could be clearly published for applicants to see, as well as for colleagues to contemplate. modeled on the list adopted by many English departments across the country. The lists are not identical with each other, since they depend on the individuals that make up the individual departments. They are, however, strikingly similar. Take this one from SUNY Cortland: Courses in English literature will « treat literature from a broad range of sources through a variety of critical approaches, covering, as appropriate, the following elements of each genre being taught:

plot
 character
 theme
 style
 imagery
 structure
 point of view
 symbolism
 tone
 setting
 figures of speech »

Now such lists come about by a natural consensus; that is, by informal consultation in the form of chit-chat between department members. Note that the mechanism of achieving the consensus is informal. It requires no work, in the sense of departmental meetings, committee formation or written reports. It

also requires no cost to the administration and therefore requires no permission from them. No cost to the administration. No work required of the faculty. Now, in order to concoct the list modeled on the English list, work IS required. A little. Just a little, and that only for those who elect to do it. The mechanism excludes any formal department faculty meetings, any committee formation or any progress reports to higher authority. Harry and Isabel start talking about it over coffee. They ask Gordon about his ideas. The three of them dream up some possibilities. Perhaps one or two more faculty join them. Perhaps not.

That is the mechanism. As to what they are « dreaming up, » they are simply consulting themselves and each other about what they hope their students will remember after they have left college. They rule out most of the subject matter that they tested them on while taking the course. Nor are they sure that the students remember anything at all. It is a matter of subjacent ideas, awareness elements that they give the class as they seek to implant the « facts » of the course. In teaching the « tu » form of the verb and its usage, examples given by each teacher vary but light is shed on a particular area of class distinction and a perception of difference between American and European cultures. So the three professors who start the mechanism concur that they should each draw up a list of twelve or more factors of this nature. As they get together over beer or coffee, they compare notes and re-adjust their categories and soon come up with a list of twelve that all three agree on.

If none of them is chair, they (or one of them) propose the list to be used in recruiting. If the department is lethargic and lackadaisical, they agree to type up the list, which might appear something like this :

point of view
 spelling
 faux amis
 customs
 culture
 meaning
 connotation
 class
 formality
 idioms
 usage
 slang
 etc ;

If there be some cantankerous soul in the department, talking with her/him might convince her/him that it wouldn't be necessary for her/him to adhere to the list. If the colleague is extremely difficult, you print the list, indicating a dissenting voice.

Now, to get back to bringing pressure to bear on the recruiters to push the Foreign Language Department, one of these pressures might well be to change « Foreign Language» departments to read «Translation» departments. Yet the idea meets with three modes of resistance: 1) Translation is too advanced for undergraduates, 2) the change of name is superficial labelling and 3)restructurintg the curriculum would be chaotic. These objections stem from misunderstanding. It is true that professional translation cannot be created at the undergraduate level. It is true that professional training presupposes the acquisition of the target language by the candidate. But language learning is already basically translation, at least in part, and constitutes PRE-professional training for later professional study at the graduate level. As for the label change being superficial, there is no reason that the apparent superficiality should be an objection. Similar changes converted « Government » to « Political Science, » and « Audio-Visual Aids » to « Learning Resources. » In the case of « Translation , » this label may be perceived as a more apt designation than « Foreign Languages » or « French » or « Spanish, » etc. The present terms imply the acquisition of a mastery of the target foreign language. A few gifted students do attain mastery. Most do not. Nor do we intend to achieve that elusive goal. We do manage to acquaint the bulk of our students with the general problems of bringing into English words and expressions in a language not our own and vice versa. Finally the confusion of restructurization is a chimera. Restructuring will not occur as a result of name change. No instructor will have to change his method, his textbook or his syllabus. Courses in civilization and literature will be retained. No attempt will be made to anticipate a professional career in translating the procedures of petroleum production, the jungle of legal parlance or the jargon of trade and commerce. Our broader aim is to present the over-all language and culture of the target area. We already do this very well, thank you.

We can do more than simply counter the main objections to the name change. We can take a closer look at each one. The misunderstanding regarding translation arises from the special point of view of the professional translator. To her/him translation means exclusively *professional* translation. The present proposal reverts to the broader general sense of the term. To this end, translation is simply the expression in one 's own language of words or expressions in a language not our own (and conversely expression in a language

not one's own in our own language). Obviously such a perception does not pretend to create professional translators full-blown in four years of study. The beginning student, however, learns that « maison » means « house, » but he soon realizes that a Frenchman's vision of a typical house is not the same as the American's vision. Even on Day One he learns that « je » means « I », that « appeler » means « to call » and that « m' » means « me,» but that the translation of « Je m'appelle » is « My name is ! » (In a later, literature course, he might be asked to translate the first sentence of *Moby Dick* into French !) Those are two revelations of basic translation problems, even though far, far away from professional levels.

Labels are considered frequently as superficial or transitory or both. In fact, only a few are useful. In the case of academic departments, the sciences seem clear enough. Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Geology, etc. But are they ? They are traditional, certainly, and tradition in itself carries weight. We all know what those sciences are...or do we ? Probably not unless we expose ourselves to a year of any one. The labels do not explain the contents. On the other hand, Sociology says social relationships, History rimes with mystery, and everybody loves Music. But perhaps the emptiest of all is Foreign Language. The title is pejorative. There is something distasteful about foreign things, like « foreign matter. »The individual languages fare better, but could be improved by sporting the label « Spanish Culture, French Culture, German Culture, etc. In large institutions the separate departments are unofficially viewed as the « Language » Departments, implying that English is not a language (« foreign » is implied.)

Translation as a possible designation indicates what our aim is and has been, in teaching foreign languages. We do not aim at developing a mastery of a language in four years or less. Let us imagine, then, just what material we might want to teach if we had something called a Translation curriculum. What could we want to teach in the first two levels of college study ? Certainly it would be necessary to teach vocabulary, word order and genders. We might also want to teach, for example, verb tenses, conjugations and strong verbs, or perhaps the subjunctive. Adjectives, too, would deserve attention : agreement with nouns and feminine forms of certain adjectives. That's just a sampling, enough to show that a translation course is simply what we presently call a « language » course. Sixty or seventy years ago, students were asked : « Translate the following sentences into French (or German or Spanish) » and also to « translate the following sentences in Spanish into English. » More recent texts may say, « Write the following (English phrases) in German. » Would we teach special vocabularies, like petroleum ; nuclear engineering or public accounting ? No, these are the business of professional translation. Our students are beginners. Nor would one attempt such matters as topic sentences,

historical present and scientific or legal styles. These are such things as graduate or professional levels are made of. Still, we would want to supply the student on the junior and senior levels with a general vocabulary and more advanced grammatical constructions and idioms. Readings in literature are the most available source for these, but they also contribute to a knowledge of the culture of the speakers of the target language. Culture has various meanings for various people, but whatever the definition, it is an acquaintance with it that gives the students the « feel » of the language : formality/informality, upper class/lower class, and intellectual/ political audiences.

And so it is that the things we teach in our present language courses would be the same as those taught in « translation » courses ! As a matter of fact, the label : « Translation » as a departmental name more adequately describes what the courses we teach are about. As it is, it is presumptuous to « teach German, » implying that the student, at the end of two years of study will have a mastery of the language. Even at the end of four years, he can only be assured of having had an *introduction* to the language. He will have had an exposure to many of the problems of translating. So the label is not simply a label change and nothing more. It is a label change presenting a clarification of the aims of our teaching.

In sum, there would be no change imposed on anyone once the name change became effective. All courses the same. No teachers' idiosyncrasies infringed. The aims of the departments would be the same, with greater definition. There is, though, a step that could be added to this aim definition that would also increase pressure on the recruitment teams. This element would require more work (betraying my initial guarantee !), but it would be completely voluntary. This added push would be to establish the department list of subjacent elements that could be clearly published for applicants to see that was presented above. And the list would be used to bolster the recruiters' message to the applicants. The Translation Department provides language instruction as language for language- learning lovers and at the same time provides a basis for the career-minded who see the possibilities of a professional translating job. «And here are the factors that the professors seek to stress :.... » Therewith they display the above list.

In short, a change of name from Foreign Language to Translation will help recruitment staff to attract students to the study of the traditional non-English languages. It will not solve the problem of a lack of translators of the rarer languages except insofar as it will call public attention to that problem. It will not deter the student who simply lives to study a language not his own. It will increase second language class size without any change or extra burden in the habitual patterns of teaching developed by each individual teacher. In the

process, it will enable teachers to cast an introspective eye on what he has been doing and will continue to do, and it will provide a meaning even to the students who study no more than the first two years

Robert M. Hammond

Mem. No. **131807**