# Alien Wisdoms in English and Foreign Language Programs

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THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS OF higher education are bringing the teaching of English and the teaching of foreign languages closer together. For an increasing number of students, English is a foreign, a second, an international, or a global language, not the language of a unitary mother tongue and culture. Increasingly, students of French, German, or Spanish are learning a foreign language on the background of experiences of migrations, displacements, and expatriations but also on the background of multilingual and multicultural experiences. The typical language learner is, for example, a Nigerian with a Canadian passport learning German at the University of Texas, or a Czech citizen with a knowledge of English, German, and French enrolled in a Japanese class at the University of California, Berkeley. The common denominator among language learners is their interest in language in all its manifestations: literary and nonliterary, academic and nonacademic, as a mode of thought, as a mode of action, and as a symbol of identity. At UC Berkeley, the current success of courses with titles like Language, Mind, and Society; Language in Discourse; Language and Power; and Language and Identity—as they are offered by English programs, foreign language programs, linguistics departments, or schools of education—is a sign of a renewed interest in the way language expresses, creates, and manipulates "alien wisdoms" through discourse.

I borrow the phrase "alien wisdom" from the title of the book by Arnaldo Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization*, in which the author explores the different patterns of language acquisition in antiquity. Whereas the Romans, at least the educated ones, all learned Greek and the other foreign languages of the time, the Greeks, he argues, were so imbued with their cultural superiority that they never bothered to learn anybody else's language, thus depriving themselves of valuable sources of knowledge. I would like to apply the concept of alien wisdom to the insights gained from a greater collaboration between teachers of English and foreign literatures and between composition teachers and teachers of foreign languages, who find themselves often to be alien to each other on their own campuses.

Both English and foreign language departments house various disciplines that are quite alien to one another. Whereas one half of the curricula of both departments gives place of choice to the literary manifestations of language, the other half—English composition studies and foreign language studies—deals with the multifarious manifestations of language in everyday life. There are, of course, a host of variations on this basic structure. The literary province of both English and foreign language programs has come to include cultural studies, film studies, gender studies, and postcolonial studies, and each department includes one or several linguists. The language instructional programs often include translation courses, language for special purposes, foreign languages across the curriculum, and others.

In both English and foreign language programs, the study of literature is diachronic, or historical: scholarship is cut up in centuries, stylistic currents, schools of humanistic thought, literary themes. By contrast, the study of language is synchronic: scholarship or research is cut up in fields of educational psychology or the social sciences (literacy studies, second language acquisition [SLA] research, applied linguistics), according to various schools of research. There

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are currently attempts to bridge the gap between language theory and teaching practice through increased attention to areas such as composition theory, SLA, and applied linguistics theory on the one hand, and their pedagogical applications on the other. It is the common interest in teaching that unites the two halves of English and foreign language programs.

By definition, English and foreign language programs deliver instruction in different languages, and different languages are likely to channel different thoughts. Whereas English programs teach language, literacy, and literature in the dominant language of the land, according to an Anglo-American style of critical thought and scholarship that is often claimed to be universal, foreign language programs explicitly teach the foreign as foreign. The language of instruction is itself a foreign language that conveys alien ways of approaching and conceptualizing the familiar furniture of the universe. In an instantiation of the weak form of the principle of linguistic relativity, they put into question the universal validity of the English language to express everything that exists under the sun. To be sure, foreign language programs also teach foreign literatures in their English translation, and content-based foreign language instruction teaches courses traditionally conducted in English, such as history, sociology, or the Bible, in French or German—thus reducing the amount of foreignness featured in the foreign language programs. But this is often the result of enrollment pressures and the need to compete with English programs for students and faculty positions. For, in fact, the very raison d'être of foreign language programs is their valuable foreignness.

Of course, one could argue that Donne, Milton, and Wordsworth are as alien to native students of English as Rabelais, Dante, and Goethe are to foreign language learners. But the teaching of English as a mother tongue can build on a primary and secondary education that has taught students how to speak, read, and write in English. It is not contingent on a prerequisite of five or six semesters of intensive linguistic groundwork, associated with in-depth instruction in the historical, social, and cultural mentalities associated with the foreign literature under study. Few American students know much about German history, society, and culture as seen from a German perspective before embarking on the study of *der*, *die*, *das* and being exposed to German literature.

It is easy to imagine one way in which English and foreign language programs could strengthen their collaboration. As is already the case with film and gender studies or various schools of critical theory, scholars in literary and cultural studies in both English and foreign language programs easily team teach courses, run interdepartmental PhD minor programs and joint conferences, and share research projects—at least on my campus. But it is rare for foreign language applied linguists and English composition scholars to do the same. Their research base has developed separately from each other and so have their objectives. Composition research and SLA research are now radically different fields, the former based in rhetoric and cultural studies, focused on written language, and with a decidedly postmodern thrust; the latter based in linguistics and the social sciences, focused mainly on the spoken language, and with a modern, positivistic orientation. And yet, so many benefits could accrue from greater collaboration. English programs would gain insights into the abilities and mindsets of their many nonnative students; foreign language programs would gain an understanding of the larger theoretical issues regarding the acquisition of literacy in academic settings.

Of course not every language is created equal on American campuses. Many foreign language programs are struggling for survival. They envy the large enrollments of the powerful English programs. They want to diversify their offerings, teach more courses in translation, and satisfy their faculty by enabling it to teach in English outside the foreign language programs. But, at the same time, they are aware of the risks of losing their cultural identity as foreign lan-

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guage programs. English programs are eager to diversify their faculties in order to respond to the needs of an ever more multicultural student body. Neither English nor foreign language programs can afford to lose the alien wisdoms that are the source of their strength and intellectual renewal. Even though the pressure to domesticate these wisdoms into the dominant semiotic code is enormous, everyone stands to gain by engaging colleagues and students on the other side of the departmental Hellespont.

## Work Cited

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# Rethinking the Place of Spanish

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One of my favorite sayings—situated on the tenuous interface between humor and seriousness—is "Money isn't everything, but it's way ahead of whatever is in second place," which is cynical and materialistic but impossible to completely reject. In our profession, one could plug in the word *Spanish* and derive the same results. At colleges and universities across the country, enrollments in Spanish language courses are growing out of proportion, while programs in other languages often struggle to attract students; some small language offerings have in fact become endangered species, and comparisons to the laws of natural selection permeate the discourse. To the many acronyms that pepper the jargon of our profession has been added LOTS—that is, languages other than Spanish—a disclaimer used whenever language programs and language enrollments are being discussed. This acronym is troubling, since it categorically removes Spanish from the discussion of language programs as being too big to handle or—even more sinister—as somehow constituting an obstacle to the teaching and appreciation of the remaining languages, that is, of the LOTS. Even more troubling are the constant references to the "Spanish problem," heard among university administrators and language program directors, and the downright offensive comparisons between Spanish enrollments and gorillas of varying dimensions and body weight, depending on who is offering the simile. Why should one facet of the disciplines we hold most dear become a problem akin to a threatening beast escaped from the menagerie? I am aware of no global demonization of other trends found in the humanities (sarcastic and often politically incorrect backroom comments notwithstanding); we had no structuralist, deconstruction, feminist, Marxist, or postmodern problem, and the current attractiveness of such areas as applied linguistics, gender studies, and cultural studies is not seen as problematic except by a small group of professors whose own courses are perceived as losing enrollment to these upstart newcomer fields. Across universities no one speaks of the math problem, the science problem, the physical education problem, or even the English problem, despite the fact that all students are required to take courses in these areas and that staffing and resource issues often cause the shoe to pinch in many places simultaneously. To face these issues squarely, we need to examine facts and fantasies, pride and prejudice, public virtues and private

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