

Language as a Liberal Art

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Abstract

This essay was the keynote address at the 13th annual North American Christian Foreign Language Association (NACFLA) Conference at Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, CA, April 3-5, 2003. The author contends that the best argument for language study is not the pragmatic one that dominates contemporary rhetoric, but a liberal one—an argument grounded in the liberal arts tradition.

It is an honor and a pleasure to welcome the North American Christian Foreign Language Association to the campus of Azusa Pacific University. I appreciate the invitation to speak this morning. Please know I have reservations about this assignment—it seems presumptuous for a scholar in one field to lecture scholars in another. In this case, it is even more suspect, because, as you probably know, not only am I a political scientist, but much worse, I am an administrator.

One thing I have learned during my administrative career is that it is dangerous for an administrator to speak authoritatively about difficult intellectual questions. Faculty members expect me to answer simple questions: when am I eligible for a sabbatical? how do I apply for promotion? why is my budget so meager? But addressing intellectual matters is to tread on thin ice. Having learned my lesson, my intention is not to pontificate, but to invite dialogue. My hope is to provoke your thinking, if not for the course of the conference, then at least for the next hour.

It seems to me that the North American Christian Foreign Language Association is likely to be concerned with a question often asked by parents, students, administrators, and fellow faculty members: why study foreign language? In particular, why would an institution of higher educa-

tion *require* the study of a foreign language?

For many years, I naively assumed such study was beyond question. After all, well-educated individuals studied a second language in high school, in college, and in preparation for language exams in graduate school. However, in preparing my remarks, I ran across this quote: “There is probably no educational problem about which there is more confusion and disagreement than the role of foreign language. . . . Experienced teachers vary between the extreme poles, between, that is, the view that foreign language has no appropriate place in general education, and, on the contrary, that it includes the truly essential subjects.”¹ This comment sounds strangely familiar—something one might hear today. But the quote is from 1945, in the famous *Harvard Redbook*, long viewed as an authoritative guide to liberal education. So, perhaps the question has been with us for much longer than I imagined.

This question seems particularly pertinent when one reviews trends in language instruction. As you may know, the Modern Language Association (MLA) has conducted a series of nineteen surveys since 1958 in which they track enrollment in language classes. The news is mostly good.² For example,

- The most recent 1998 survey showed a 4.8% enrollment increase at four-year institutions and an 8.8% increase in two-year colleges since 1995.
- The total enrollment at two-year, four-year, and graduate institutions reached an all-time high of nearly 1.2 million students.
- Because of this enrollment trend, some programs are flourishing. In fact, “there are more programs with increasing than decreasing enrollments.”³
- The news is particularly bright for Spanish language programs. The MLA reports that “Spanish is clearly the language of choice for students who study languages.” Spanish enjoyed an 8.3% increase and now includes 55% of all enrollments.
- It is also encouraging to know students are pursuing a greater variety of languages. There are at least 138 different languages being taught, ranging from Albanian to Chagatai, Cherokee to Icelandic, Ilocano to Ojibwa, Pali to Zulu.
- Although the total enrollment remains low, it is also good to see significant percentage increases in the number of students studying Italian, Chinese, and American Sign Language.

- While these trends are encouraging, not all of the news is good news:
- Today's growth rate is not even close to the dramatic increases of the 1960s.
 - Enrollments have dropped sharply in many traditional languages. In the last thirty years, French and German have dropped by over 50%, Russian by 40%, and Latin by 25%.
 - It is worrisome to note a 15% decrease in graduate program enrollment in the late 90s.
 - Perhaps most disappointing is that growth in language study has not kept up with growth in college enrollment. For example, in 1965, nearly six million students were attending college, and almost 1 million students registered for a language class (16.6%). In 1995, there were still one million students registered for language classes, but total college enrollment had grown to 14.5 million (8%). Had enrollment in language courses kept up, current classes would be more than double what they are today.

As language departments strive to reverse this trend, build enrollments, and attract a larger percentage of college students, I have noted something interesting about the character of the argument on behalf of language study. It seems to me that only *one* argument is being used with any great frequency to justify the study of language. This argument is not necessarily wrong, but I fear it is overused and may not, in the end, be the best argument.

The argument *du jour* is a pragmatic one, which emphasizes language learning for its utility as a tool in the modern world. In brief, the argument is that we live in an increasingly diverse and interdependent world. Surviving and thriving in that world requires an ability to communicate in more than one language. Therefore, the aim of language study is communicative competence. The emphasis is oral communication, and the buzzword is proficiency. Instructors aim to help students reach increasingly difficult levels of proficiency as they move through each semester of language study.

An excellent illustration is a Modern Language Association promotional brochure entitled "Knowing Other Languages Brings Opportunities." It touts the practical benefits of language study by telling students it will help them gain "a competitive advantage" and "get a better job." The brochure claims that "three years of language study will catch the eye of anyone reading your job or college application" and that an employee with second language proficiency "may look much better at promotion time than one who knows only English."

Is utility the only reason for studying language? Most concede that it is not, but practical considerations preclude the articulation of other arguments.⁴ I concede that pragmatic arguments are important, often essential, but they have one fatal flaw. They are dependent on circumstances. When circumstances change, the need to act a certain way disappears. Persuasive pragmatic arguments also require credible evidence that claimed benefits are real. Some critics of language study remain unconvinced. They ask:

- Is it really possible to achieve basic proficiency in the limited time allotted to language study? Even experts agree that two or three semesters “are hardly enough time to acquire any usable level of competence, particularly in the non-cognate languages.”⁵
- Even when proficiency is possible, is it likely that most students will retain that proficiency if they do not live in an area that permits them to practice their newfound skill?
- Moreover, if conversational competence is the aim, how do you justify the study of languages that are no longer spoken, such as Latin and Biblical Greek?
- Worse yet, what if technological advances overrun us? It is not inconceivable that world travelers, political leaders, and international business men and women will soon have at their disposal instantaneous translators of remarkable accuracy that are smaller than a Palm Pilot.

Before moving on to what seems to be a neglected argument, it is time for a confession. I am a backslidden student of language. Having obtained some level of oral proficiency of French in high school, having studied enough Biblical Greek in college to translate my own atrocious version of *I John*, and having verified reading competency of French in graduate school, I claim no proficiency in those languages today. Did I waste my time? Absolutely not.

My language courses taught me to love language, even my own. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is now one of my favorite books. I pore over Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* and Follett’s *Modern American Usage*. I have *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, *The Art of Styling Sentences*, and numerous similar dog-eared volumes on my shelf.

It is my own experience of falling in love with language that reminds me of a second argument for language study. Language is a liberal art, the study of which is essential, not for pragmatic reasons, but because it is integral to a sound liberal education. I want to raise the prospect that the

best argument is not the pragmatic one that dominates our rhetoric, but a liberal one—an argument grounded in the liberal arts tradition.

Making that argument requires a digression to define liberal education before explaining how language study addresses it. It may seem odd that a definition is necessary given that liberal education has been the chief educational aim in the West since the time of Socrates. But decades of fuzzy thinking on the topic have led to utter confusion—the kind of confusion that results from competing paradigms, ambiguous language, and everyone’s desire to co-opt the concept of liberal education in support of various educational visions.⁶

Unfortunately, the confusion over the meaning of liberal education fits well with the pragmatism that governs much of American intellectual life. Pragmatism “proposes there is no necessary, universal, or essential meaning of liberal education or liberal arts.”⁷ The meaning is determined by how we use the term, and we are free to use it in whatever way we choose. Liberal education simply means whatever we want it to mean at the moment we utter the phrase or, worse yet, it means everything and nothing.

I understand liberal education to be an education grounded in the liberal arts that extends to an investigation into the central human questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my responsibility to God, to other individuals, to the community? What is true? What is good? What is beautiful? What is just?⁸

If a liberal education is grounded in the liberal arts, it is also necessary to define that prized concept. Bruce Kimball, who has written the best historical survey of the liberal arts, uses a powerful organizing notion. It all starts, he says, with a Greek word familiar to all believers, *logos*. *Logos* means both “word” and “reason”—speaking and thinking—thought and communication. Almost everyone agrees that the definition of the liberal arts is somehow tied to these two things, the two “defining characteristics of human nature.”⁹

These two accurate translations of the same word have led to the widely used twofold division of the liberal arts. The first branch, called the *quadrivium*, is comprised of those disciplines known as the mathematical arts, the arts of wisdom and understanding—arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.¹⁰

It is the second branch, the *trivium*, that commands our attention this morning. It is comprised of those disciplines known as the literary arts, the verbal arts, the humane letters, the arts of eloquence—grammar, logic, and rhetoric.¹¹ This branch prizes speech, talking, communication.

All together, the liberal arts are the seven pillars of wisdom, preparing the learner for the study of theology and philosophy. After having mastered the arts of eloquence and wisdom, one is prepared for an investigation into the central human questions, the true aim of liberal education.

Foreign language instruction is deeply rooted in this traditional understanding of a liberal arts education. It is ingrained in at least four ways. First, in teaching a language, you teach *about* language. The *trivium*, the arts of eloquence, is all about language. It assumes that language is essential, for by it humans know all that they know. Language is a stepping-stone to being fully human, for we use it to know truth, teach values, enhance virtue, develop character, and mold good citizens.

Good language instruction incorporates all three of the arts of eloquence. To paraphrase Mortimer Adler, we might say, logic is the art of ordering thought, grammar is the art of ordering language to express those thoughts, and rhetoric is the art of ordering both language and thought to communicate effectively.¹² As you know from your work as language instructors, “the three arts cannot be separated, . . . they are mutually supporting disciplines for the simple reason that language without thought is nonsense; thought without language is ineffable; and both without consideration of the human context in communication are lacking in direction.”¹³

When you teach language, you start with the most fundamental building blocks of language, *words*, and you teach students how to combine those words to express feelings and ideas. Ultimately, you teach them “exact speaking and writing, persuasive expression, and clear thinking.”¹⁴ In so doing, you teach them about language in the process of teaching a language.

Language instruction is ingrained in a liberal arts education in a second way. Language study sharpens one’s sense of his or her own language. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe famously said, “He who knows no foreign language, knows nothing of his own.”¹⁵ It has been argued that the “prime function” of teaching a foreign language at the elementary level “is not to give a practical command of the new language; on the contrary, it is to illuminate English in these two respects in which English supremely needs illumination, namely, syntax and vocabulary.”¹⁶

When we learn a new language, we are compelled to “draw comparisons, note etymologies,” and we enjoy anew the “experience in putting words together” to express thoughts. In so doing, as one author says, language study, like travel, “inevitably raises contrasts,” namely contrasts with one’s native tongue.¹⁷

Language study also reveals similarities. The best example of this is grammar. Teaching a foreign languages requires that one review basic grammatical principles. One teaches grammar by comparing and contrasting with English grammar. This is a valuable exercise. It is difficult to find much enthusiasm about the teaching of English grammar in primary, secondary, or postsecondary schools.¹⁸ English teachers often downplay grammar, emphasizing global concerns and the development of creative capacities. Even linguists have transformed their field of inquiry into more of a cognitive science. Language teachers are among the few who still find it necessary to teach grammar to one degree or another.¹⁹ In a grammatically-challenged age, we need all remaining of bastions of grammar study to stand tall!

My third point about language as a liberal art is that the study of language expands the horizons of students. Again, I quote Wittgenstein who said, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."²⁰ The first step of expanding the limits of your student's world is when you introduce words without English equivalents. The *Harvard Redbook* reminds us that "to learn that other languages have words with meanings which no English word carries, that they sort meanings in other ways and link them up in other patterns, can be a Copernican step, one of the most liberating, the most exciting, and the most sobering opportunities for reflection that the humanities can offer."²¹

Jacques Barzun has written, "The ultimate educational value of knowing a foreign language is that it lets you into the workings of other human minds, like *and* unlike your own. It takes you out of your narrow local self and points out ways of seeing and feeling that cannot be perceived apart from the alien words that record the perception."²² A full and rewarding study of answers to life's great questions requires that one explore other ways of understanding, ways that emerge from cultures different from one's own. In this way, according to Barzun, "the study of a language becomes the study of a people, and the notion of a language as a tool destroys itself: a tool is a dead unchanging thing; a language lives. A tool is for some ulterior purpose; a language exists as a world in itself. . . . In short, words are not clothing for an idea, they are its incarnation."²³

This incarnational aspect of human language should rattle the cage of your students. At the end of day, learning a foreign language should entail learning another culture. *Nothing* more fully expresses the soul of a culture than its language. Learning how another culture records and accounts for the human condition is a broadening experience that one should never forget.

My fourth point about language and a liberal arts education is that language instruction can be a vehicle for moral education.²⁴ It is commonplace to assert that education sharpens the critical intellect, but will it strengthen moral virtue? Should it “develop the reasoning faculties of our youth” as well as “instill in them the precepts of virtue and order?”²⁵ Even a traditionalist such as Mortimer Adler distinguishes the mind from the will and asserts that sharpening the mind has little to do with making good moral choices.²⁶ I agree, however, with those who argue that any “disjunction of moral education and intellectual education is perilous.”²⁷

Historically, Christians strove to foster both intellectual and moral virtue—intellectual virtue to understand God’s truth; moral virtue to abide by God’s will. This is not an easy task. We can teach about virtue by requiring that students know the definition of courage, humility, and charity, but instilling the habit of practicing moral virtue proves more difficult.

Does language study shape the moral character of students? It seems to me that it does, when properly understood and pursued. For example, I believe it lends itself to the inculcation of both humility and love.

Serious language study should instill a degree of humility, which, as Aquinas reminds us, is a “moderating and restraining moral virtue.”²⁸ He defines the virtue of humility as “a moderation of spirit” that restrains the “impetuosity of the soul.” It tempers a prideful tendency, making one ever mindful of one’s own deficiencies, making certain “that we should not deem ourselves to be above what we are.”²⁹ It is humbling to be reminded that other people in other places have insightful, sometimes superior, ways of expressing the human experience.

Language instruction can also be a means of inculcating the moral virtue of love. David Smith and Barbara Carvill write, “Foreign language education . . . must be shaped by respect for the other as an image bearer of God; it must be eager to hear the other; and it must be driven by love for God and for one’s neighbor.” Moreover, it enables one “to be a blessing to strangers in a foreign land, and to be hospitable to strangers in their own homeland.”³⁰ Language instructors should help students get beyond the desire to learn for the sake of profit, pleasure, or power, urging them to seek “the more fundamental aim of cross-cultural communication, namely, to build hospitable and kind relationships and good human connections through which people enrich and bless each other, having the well-being and flourishing of each other at heart.”³¹

In closing, I fear for the immediate future of liberal education.

The postmodern pragmatism that pervades most universities has left it in shambles. Liberal education means little or nothing in the face of the rampant vocationalism that rules most campuses. Liberal education will survive, however, and its best chance to *thrive* is at Christian colleges. We have a meta-narrative that makes sense of life and encourages a search for truth. We share common ground that permits a common conversation. We hold out some hope of knowing truth and being able to express it, which raises the prospect of a wedding of wisdom and eloquence.

Every field of study grounded in the liberal arts should highlight that aspect of itself—it *is* its greatest virtue. We can teach language as a valuable tool, or we can teach it as a key component of a liberal arts education. You do the latter when you teach about language itself, when you teach students about their own language, when you show students how other cultures, using other languages, shed light on the human condition, and when you strive to inculcate moral virtue.

NOTES

¹ *General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee*, with an introduction by James Bryant Conant (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945), 119-120.

² The following information is derived from Richard Brod and Elizabeth B. Welles, "Foreign Language Enrollments in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 1998," *ADFL Bulletin* 31 (Winter 2000): 22-29.

³ The exceptions are programs in German and Russian. See David Goldberg and Elizabeth B. Welles, "Successful College and University Foreign Language Programs, 1995-1999: Part 1," *Profession 2001*: 174.

⁴ For example, in an article that focuses almost exclusively on communicative competence, the authors concede, "We also do not believe that production of communicative competence is the sole—or always the most important—purpose of all university-level language study, only that is a vitally important goal that we are failing to meet on a national level." See David Maxwell and Nina Garrett, "Meeting National Needs: The Challenge to Language Learning in Higher Education," *Change* (May-June 2002): 24.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ My thinking on this topic was previously published in Diana Glyer and David Weeks, eds. *The Liberal Arts in Higher Education: Challenging Assumptions, Exploring Possibilities* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998). Some of this material is drawn directly from that book.

⁷ Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*, expanded edition (New York, NY: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995), viii.

⁸ Liberal education is not primarily:

- a) the development of transferable intellectual capacities (critical thinking, higher-order reasoning, intellectual virtue) or the sharpening of basic skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening),
- b) a survey of the cultural heritage of Western civilization, or
- c) general education—an amorphous notion used to describe either (i) an educational experience that prepares all students for life in general, a common denominator approach, (ii) a basic level of study in most major fields of inquiry, that is to say, a required “taste” of many different fields, or (iii) a comprehensive term used to describe the combination of academic and co-curricular experiences that constitute a student’s complete college experience.

See Glyer and Weeks in *The Liberal Arts in Higher Education: Challenging Assumptions, Exploring Possibilities*, xiii-xvi.

⁹ Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers*, 239.

¹⁰ Glyer and Weeks, *The Liberal Arts in Higher Education*, xv.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹² Mortimer J. Adler, “What is Basic About English?” in *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1990), 154-155.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Jeffrey F. Huntsman, “Grammar,” in *The Seven Liberal Arts in the Middle Ages*, edited by David Wagner (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983), 58.

¹⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in *On Art and Antiquity*, vol. 3, issue 1 (1821).

¹⁶ *General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee*, 124.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁸ “Faculty members commonly complain that today’s high-school graduates are not acquainted with even the most basic concepts of grammar, such as tense, case, or even parts of speech.” Rodney D. Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum. “Of Grammatophobia,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 3, 2003): B20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961): 5.6.

²¹ *General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee*, 120.

²² Jacques Barzun, *Teacher in America* (Atlantic-Little, Brown and Company, 1945):

Liberty Press, 1981), 190.

²³ Ibid., 191.

²⁴ This section was not included in my oral remarks. Following my address, Jan Evans of Baylor University spoke eloquently about language study as a way of demonstrating love of others. Her remarks, a subsequent email exchange with David Smith, and my reading of Smith and Carvill's *The Gift of the Stranger* prompted this addition to my address.

²⁵ Thomas Jefferson, "Report of the Rockfish Gap Commission on the Proposed University of Virginia, 1818," in *American Higher Education: A Documentary History*, edited by Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 195.

²⁶ Adler claims, "The contribution that can be made by higher education is mainly limited to the sphere of the intellectual virtues." Mortimer Adler, "Education and the Pursuit of Happiness," in *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind* (New York, NY: Collier Books, Macmillan, 1990), 87.

²⁷ Mark Van Doren, *Liberal Education* (Henry Holt, 1943, reprinted in Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1959), 63.

²⁸ See the discussion of humility in volume four of St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, TX: Thomas More Publishing, 1948), 1841-1848.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 1845, 1847.

³⁰ David I. Smith and Barbara Carvill, *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality, and Foreign Language Learning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 57-58.

³¹ Ibid., 99.

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