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Owen: Traitor or Liberator in Brian Friel's *Translations*

For some years now, I have, on occasion—perhaps when a piece of literature prompted my remarks—told my students something like this: "If you ever find yourself leading an invading army into foreign lands with the intention of setting yourself up as emperor, be sure that your first act is to forbid the people you have conquered from speaking or thinking in their native tongue." Of course, my assumption has always been that no student of mine would ever find himself or herself in such a situation with such a predisposition.

In offering this advice, I was never quite sure where I had encountered the idea. But recently, as I was reading Brian Friel's play *Translations* (first produced in 1980), I was reacquainted with two possible sources. Back in 1596 Edmund Spenser, in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, argued, ". . . it hath ever been the use of the conqueror to despise the language of the conquered, and to force him by all means to learn his" (67). Spenser focused his argument on the Irish, and said, ". . . the speech being Irish, the heart must needs be Irish . . ." (68). He added that taking away the Irishman's surname, based on his family names, and compelling him to assume a surname based on occupation, place of birth, or physical characteristics would make him less Irish and more likely to be a loyal subject of the King.

Much more recently than the sixteenth century, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a contemporary Kenyan novelist

extended the thought:

> Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. . . . Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (2538)

Here Ngugi suggests that the relationship between language and both cultural memory and cultural identity is so close that taking away a people's language and translating it into a new one is taking away their cultural experience as a people and giving them a minor role in a new culture. A quick reading of *Translations* suggests that this process is exactly what is happening in its pages and that one of the characters, by his involvement in translating Irish place names, is both a translator and a traitor to his cultural identity. I hope to show, however, that Owen, who at first glance is the traitor, is also a liberator, though something of a diminished and tortured one, and that his roles as both traitor and liberator do not cancel each other out.

Translations is set in Donegal, in the small town of Baile Baeg (Bally Beg) in 1833 at the leading edge of a "translation" from one culture to another. Haunting the action of the play is the specter of the potato famine evidenced only by the "sweet smell" frequently referred to. But that famine is a decade into the future. More evident and immediate is the presence of British soldiers who have been deployed to carry out an ordnance survey of Ireland, mapping and renaming all landmarks in "standard" English to accord with the Act of Union of 1800 (following the Irish Rebellion of 1798), which merged Ireland and the Kingdom of England into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The action of the play takes place in and around evening classes at a "hedge-school" (a school

held in the open air) presided over by Hugh, a boozy scholar who is more comfortable in the world of the classics (and the jug of poteen) than in the world of change in which he finds himself. Of his two sons, one, Manus, who does the actual work of running the unauthorized school, suffers an unrequited love for Maire, one of the students, described by the author as a "strong-minded, strong-bodied woman in her twenties with a head of curly hair" (1209). He also suffers from a crippling leg injury inflicted by his drunken father's falling on him when Manus was an infant.

Hugh's other son is the center of this study. Owen, or Roland, as the British soldiers he works for translate his name, has made something of a success of his life by getting out of Baile Baeg and has now come back in the employ of the British Royal Engineers as a translator. According to Owen (who interprets, rather than translates, the words of Captain Lancey, the commander of the British forces), the new map these engineers or "sappers"[1] are working on will "take the place of the estate agent's map so that from now on you will know exactly what is yours in law" (1215). His description of the goal of the exercise certainly makes it sound benign. Owen's brother, Manus, realizes that the intent of the mapping is not, in fact, benign, but part of something much more threatening. Renaming is actually a military action that will result in new ownership of property. Along with the ownership of land of the colonized goes the experience embodied in those place names and the identity of the people who formerly occupied those places. Thus, Owen is clearly acting as a traitor.

Owen's winning personality lulls the students in the hedge-school into accepting the mission as benign, rather than coming to grips with what it actually is: a traitorous translating of Ireland, from an ancient Gaelic region into a modern British colony. Captain Lancey has said that unlike the former surveys of Ireland

that originated in "forfeiture and violent transfer of property," the current survey "has for its object the relief which can be afforded to the proprietors and occupiers of land from unequal taxation" (1215). Manus, who is not so naïve, blurts out to Owen in private what the readers/viewers of the play have already figured out: that it is "a bloody military operation" (1216).

By the end of the play all that the Irish own is being systematically killed or burned by the British in search of Lieutenant Yolland, who has disappeared and has probably met his fate at the hands of the Donnelly twins, hedge-school students who have of late been truant in order to carry out heretofore minor acts of insurgency.[2] By then, Maire has found—and then lost -—a love (shared with the handsome and naïve young Lieutenant Yolland) that for a moment had transcended language and cultural barriers. Manus has secured a job in another hedge-school but has fled the soldiers because his hopeless passion for Maire and his awareness of her affection for the missing British soldier have made him a suspect. Hugh has seen his boozy hopes of a career as headmaster of an English school career crumble and has realized that the Irish, in his words, "must learn where we live." He says, "We must learn to make them [the new place names] our own. We must make them our new home" (1228). And Owen, who heretofore has seen himself as something of a liberator, has had a glimpse of the idea that in liberating the Irish from their language he has destroyed part of a culture's soul and become as much a traitor as a liberator. Ironically, it was his friend Yolland who made him aware of the beauty and importance of the Irish place names, and who, despite his job assignment, argued in favor of keeping many of the names just as they were.

Owen's traitorous acts are all related to language, and are much more serious than his mistranslations of

the invaders' words as they introduce themselves to the students in the adult-education class. Owen is central to the eradication of Irish place names, symbolic of the supplanting of the Irish language now being taught and reinforced in hedge-schools by the language of the invaders soon to be taught in the English-only free schools (such as the one at Poll nag Caorach in which Hugh believes he has the right to expect the headmaster's position). The new maps Owen is helping to create will be used, not to protect property rights, but to establish ownership for purposes of taxation or to make communication during military operations easier for the British armies.

To this point, Owen has been referred to as "treacherous" and his acts as "traitorous." But evidence in the play, and in subsequent historical events, suggests that he need not be thought of in such terms exclusively. Readers/viewers have the benefit of the hindsight that Owen cannot share. We know, for example, that Owen and other translators like him probably could not, by the year 1833, have prevented change and therefore cannot bear the brunt of the blame. Forces were in play by then that made the changes inevitable.

As seen in the play, the English language itself is seductive. This idea is illustrated in the character Maire who *wants* to learn the new language so she can emigrate to the United States and begin her life again without the poverty she has always known. Having grown tired of learning Latin in the hedge-school, she knows that she will have to move beyond it *and* abandon her native language in order to find success in the New World. She urges her hedge-school classmates to do the same: ". . . the sooner we all learn to speak English the better." She quotes Daniel O'Connell, known as "The Emancipator" or "The Liberator," as the source and inspiration of her thoughts: "The old language is a barrier to modern progress." She adds in

her own words: "I don't want Greek. I don't want Latin. I want English" (1213).

Maire sees that those who cling to dead languages can end up like Hugh or Jimmy Jack. Hugh writes poetry in Latin, but he is practically worthless on a day-to-day basis because of his constant engagements with the bottle. When Manus writes a letter for Biddy Hannah to her sister in Nova Scotia, she dictates these words for him to write, having become "so engrossed in it that she forgot who she was dictating to":"The aul drunken schoolmaster and that lame son of his [Manus] are still footering about in the hedge-school, wasting people's good time and money" (1209). Hugh, that "aul drunken schoolmaster," is an object of mockery to neighbors and students alike. Doalty, described as an "open-minded, open-hearted, generous and slightly thick" student, joins Bridget, "a plump, fresh young girl, ready to laugh, vain, and with a countrywoman's instinctive cunning," in making fun of him when Hugh is not in hearing range:

> Doalty: Three questions. Question A —Am I drunk? Question B—Am I sober? (*Into* Maire's *face.*) *Responde—responde!*
> Bridget: Question C, Master—When were you last sober? (1209)

And even his son makes fun of him, in his presence, easily mocking his teaching style:

> Owen: He's the cartographer in charge of the whole area. Cartographer, James? . . .
> Jimmy: A maker of maps.
> Owen: Indeed—and the younger man . . . is Lieutenant Yolland, and he is attached to the toponymic department Father?—*responde—responde!* (1214)

Jimmy Jack, another lover of a dead language is even more ridiculous. A bachelor in his sixties, he lives

alone. His only social interactions seem to be in the night classes. He never changes his clothes. He never bathes. He has memorized the first book of the *Satires* of Horace, but he knows only one word in English: "bosom." And he believes that the goddess Pallas Athena (the Olympian goddess of wisdom, war, the defense of towns, weaving, pottery and other crafts) has asked him to marry her. Having accepted her proposal, he wonders if she is human enough and he is god-like enough to make the match acceptable to her father, Zeus. And his doubt is a serious matter with him, as is his assurance of the offer. As Clint Garner writes in an unpublished essay, "He [Jimmy Jack] can no longer function in his homeland, among his own people, because his thought and behavior patterns are rooted in the languages of dead civilizations."

By offering role models like Hugh and Jimmy-Jack, Friel is illustrating the utter futility of living with past languages and cultures. And so, when Maire looks around herself at the hedge-school classroom, it is little wonder she finds the new language so seductive. Compared to the old ones, it looks like the language of hope, and the old ones look like the languages of futility.

As Maureen Hawkins points out, forces that threaten Irish identity are not just linguistic, nor can they be avoided merely by preserving the language A non-linguistic trend, and one that, like the seductiveness of the English language, is beyond the control or blame of Owen, is depopulation. A lack of opportunity and an abundance of poverty strengthened by British military and economic rule combined to encourage Irish people to embody Maire's ambition and leave Ireland for the United States and elsewhere. As they emigrated, they left behind a depopulated Ireland that was more and more in the hands of the British, who enjoyed the benefits of a smaller population without the expenses of relocating the people. As

Hawkins notes, Maire and her fellow emigrants even had to "pay for their own relocation" (25).

Like depopulation, the establishment of the English-only schools in Ireland is beyond the control of Owen. In them everything will be taught in English. No Gaelic Irish will be allowed. Bridget, one of the students, looks forward to their coming, as does Biddy Hannah (who had Manus write to her sister). Maire, obviously, does. And even Hugh accepts their coming and hopes he will be employed as master in the nearest one. Maire upbraids Manus for not applying there even though he would have to supplant his father. And when late in the play Manus is hired by the representatives of a hedge-school in a remote place, it seems evident that the process taking place in Baile Baeg now will take place there all too soon, and English will supplant Irish even on the island Inis Meadhon where Manus hopes to make a fresh start, and where an English-only school will inevitably replace Manus's hedge-school.

The power of memory of recent historical events, like the forces already mentioned, is beyond Owen's power to influence. Frequent reference is made in the play to the Rebellion of 1798. Doalty invokes it when Captain Lancey begins to avenge the disappearance and likely death of Yolland by ordering the destruction of the surrounding area, naming the rebels one by one as Owen has translated their names. Doalty remarks that his grandfather remembered the fight at the end of the previous century and that the British would not evict him (Doalty) without a fight. But everyone knows that the British responded to that rebellion with overwhelming force, evicting all the inhabitants and leveling their houses. When Lancey's orders, issued so that they take effect on successive days, make plain that he intends to do the same thing again, it is clear that the British are not only quite willing to "scorch the earth" of Ireland again, but are more able to do so now than they were in 1798 because of the new mapping

that makes them as terrain-savvy as the natives, and because, unlike the earlier rebels, the Irish of 1833 can no longer boast of French allies (Hawkins 27). More to the point being examined here is the fact that the survey that Owen has participated in is, in fact, an ordnance survey. As Clint Garner has pointed out (personal communication, February 2009) that means that it is intended to make artillery bombardment of the countryside from afar much more accurate and deadly.

Hugh and Jimmy Jack remember the 1798 Rebellion because as young men they marched some twenty-three miles to join the battle, their copies of Virgil's *Aeneid* in their pockets. In that classical Greek work Carthage plays an important part, and some critics (e.g., Hawkins 31-32) have noted the connection between the British and the Romans, and the Irish and the Carthaginians. The Carthaginians had the fortitude (or foolishness) to resist the Romans, and as a result, they and their country were utterly destroyed. The land that Carthage sat on was not arable for generations because salt had been plowed into the soil. Friel seems to be associating the two periods of history as a kind of suggestion that serious resistance would have led to absolute destruction, and that as the people of Carthage had been tagged with the infamous title of a people who sacrificed their children, so too did the Irish of 1833 run a similar risk of being thought of as a generationally self-destructive people.

Just as the *strength* of memory mitigates Owen's role in the conquering of a culture, so does the *weakening* of memory diminish the blame that can be assigned to him. In *Translations*, the Irish people have forgotten much of their Irish past. The learned, represented here by Hugh and Jimmy Jack, have turned their backs on Irish cultural history in their study of classical language and history. And even those who, unlike Hugh and Jimmy Jack, do not have their heads in the clouds

cannot remember why things are called what they are. In the renaming of Tobair Vree, for example, Owen explains that the name comes from the fact that it is a crossroads where nearby there is an abandoned well that once a disfigured man bathed his face in every day, believing its waters would heal his disfigurement. One day he was found drowned in the well, a likely suicide. Today, says Owen, nobody remembers what the name of the crossroads means. When Yolland, who sees that something important is being lost, or "eroded," in every translation (1220), reminds Owen that he (Owen) does remember the origins of the name, Owen replies that he does not count, because he is no longer a resident. Except in the case of Yolland, the British soldier who has fallen in love with Ireland and with Maire, and who speaks of the translation as "an eviction of sorts" (1220), no one seems to regret the loss of the place names or the language. The feeling, expressed through Hugh, who recommends English as better for the language of commerce and trade than Gaelic Irish, is that while something has been lost, something much bigger and more significant is being gained, including, in the words of Hawkins, an "expanded, enriched European identity, expanded even further by the British Empire, in place of a parochial, island-bound, tribal one that would be ill- adapted for survival in the modern world" (30).

All this would suggest, not that Owen bears no responsibility for the linguistic conquest of Ireland, but that his role was a small one, pushed along by forces much beyond his control and leading to a new Ireland better equipped to deal with contemporary problems than the old one was. So if he cannot be seen as a "liberator," at least it could be said that his efforts lead toward a "liberation" of progress, one that he could sense but that did not fully satisfy him. As Garner points out, Owen believes that Ireland cannot survive in a competitive and commercial world by

clinging to a language and culture rooted in an agrarian past. Charles Baker agrees, arguing that "a people tied too closely to their language will suffer should that language shift, as languages often do" (269). And since the language of global prosperity had, by 1833, shifted to English, so too must Ireland shift to English if it is to remain relevant. Hugh says as much to Yolland: ". . . it can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of . . . [sic] fact" (1219). Hugh speaks the words, but he does not, according to Owen, embody their truth. When Yolland says that Hugh is "astute", Owen asks if it "is astute not to be able to adjust for survival" (1219). Hugh seems to be aware of the problem without being an active part of the solution.

The feeling of the play—in that early scene as well as toward its end—is that the new language, English, is a tool by the use of which the Irish can ensure the survival of their cultural heritage. Some critics believe, with Hawkins, that Friel is suggesting that the Irish should use the English language to fight against the "effects of colonization and to preserve and reinvigorate their culture, identity, and lives" (25).

An irony in the play is that just as readers or audience members begin to realize that Owen's efforts will not necessarily lead to the eradication of the Irish identity, but could lead, over time, to something good, or at least that his efforts are a part of a general movement over which he has no control, Owen begins to realize that what he has been doing is leading to the eradication of Irish Gaelic as the dominant language and to the beginning of a more "English" Ireland. In one of his first speeches Owen had said, "Honest to God, it's such a delight to be back here with you all again—'civilized' people" (1215). He has come to realize that the civilization is now very much at risk. And even though he had said on that early occasion, "My job is to translate the *quaint archaic tongue* you

people persist in speaking into the King's good English" (1214), he sees himself at the end of the play as identified with that "quaint and archaic tongue."

If not earlier, Owen's epiphanic moment comes when Captain Lancey forces him to translate the names of the places that are to be systematically destroyed as reprisal for the disappearance of Lieutenant Yolland. After that, when Hugh makes his remarks about learning "where we live," Owen retorts bitterly, "I know where I live" (1228). His penultimate words on stage are at best ambiguous: "I've got to go. I've got to see Doalty Dan Doalty" (1228). Is he going to see if he can learn more about the fate of the missing Yolland? Or is he, as some have suggested, going to join Doalty in a futile fight alongside the Donnelly twins in trying to resist the inevitable?

His action in the play complete, it leaves only for the reader/viewer to decide what role Owen has played: Is he a traitor or a liberator? Insofar as his efforts have diminished the influence of Irish Gaelic and the culture that it "carries," to use Ngugi wa Thiong'o's construction, and have, in Spenser's terms, forced the Irish to learn the language of the conqueror, he has been a traitor. But insofar as his efforts have constituted a small part of a larger movement to usher in a new language of global prosperity and have led, over time to liberation from the poverty so clearly depicted in the play, it seems more than possible to view him as both traitor *and* liberator.

Author's Note: This paper is a product of an independent study on Irish and Scottish literature since the mid-eighteenth century that I was asked to coordinate by two exceptional students: Susan Gratto, a graduate student, and Clint Garner, an advanced undergraduate. Our study not being in chronological order, we began with Brian Friel's play *Translations*. After comparing notes, each of us wrote a paper to share. I gratefully acknowledge my students' participation in the project. A version of this paper was presented at the CEA-

MAG Spring Conference at Towson University, March 7, 2009.

Notes

[1]"Sappers" is an interesting term, as sappers in medieval warfare were sent to *undermine* fortifications, much as Owen's translations undermine Irish culture.

[2]Ambiguity surrounds the nature of some of the Donnelly twins' acts of insurgency: when Bridget says that "two of the soldiers' horses were found last night at the foot of the cliffs" (211), she does not reveal if the horses were living or dead when they were found.

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To Commence from Loneliness

Loneliness in the crowd
Administratively random
Choosing their space and clinging
Alone together
The students have signed on to learn, uncommitted

Here comes the Guide
From across space sharing skill
Bearing demands, prancing smile

Mental attendance minimal
All are upon some, their, journey
The guide bears them
They learn by socializing their work
Laughing at the guide, uniting
To help each other achieve the goal
And look back across time

Feel, hold, show development
And move forward with knowledge
That pleasure pursued with reason
And vice versa
May be a pattern of existence
To commence from loneliness

What It's Like in My Classroom

I praise myself
Play with sexual innuendo
Allow ourselves to go off subject
Just to keep them awake and engaged
Today I addressed the proper conditions
To undertake a revolution,
Knowing the revolutionaries are likely to shoot me.
These are reason over sentiment
The unified subjective
And objective in action
The implication of history
The manifestations of philosophy
The beauty and ache of literature
Triangulated into thesis
Upon which rational discussion leads
Emotion to be productive
Or fail, sink or swim, stand or fall,

Take action or die
Take action and die
And have a good time doing it

Between the Chinese and English Cultures of Learning: Negotiating Communicative Language Teaching

That Chinese and English are now the top languages in the world is a statistical fact: Mandarin Chinese is spoken natively by the largest population in the world; and with about the same number, over a billion, English is the official language of the largest world population. Not surprisingly, the new millennium has witnessed an increased interest in their interaction, with the Chinese being the more proactive. A Chinese Ministry of Education document issued in 2001 decreed that English be offered in all schools from primary school on, starting with the cities and gradually moving on to smaller towns and rural areas (Wang, 2002). Considering the estimated number of primary school students at the time of the decision, more than 200 million (Wu, 2001), this is without a doubt an ambitious move. In the US the recognition of the prominence of Mandarin Chinese in the world has been

more timid—with Chinese primary school teachers coming to the US for two years to teach their language to American children or Mandarin Chinese replacing European languages as foreign language offerings in secondary schools and colleges— certainly falling quite short of an educational movement.

That is not to say that English was not taught in China or Chinese in the US before 2001. But in both countries the results—i.e., competent speakers of the two languages—have been rather disappointing. Sometimes after ten years of English instruction, Chinese learners could not communicate with any semblance of fluency, just as in the US, after many years of learning a foreign language, American students are at a loss when it comes time to use it on its native soil.

While the teaching of foreign languages has never been the strong suit of the American educational system, what the US has often created and successfully exported is theory and methodology of foreign language learning and instruction. For over two decades, for instance, the so-called Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has received thousands of pages of expert discussion (e.g., Canale and Swain, 1980; Littlewood, 1981; Brown, 2001). It continues to be the language teaching methodology of the day: practitioners who do not adhere to it, who persist in the teaching habits of the old—with grammar and translation as the central parts of the curriculum—are assigned to the garbage can of language teaching history.

A strong theory of language learning, based in both the language acquisition of one's mother tongue and the learning of foreign languages, includes a number of variables, having to do with both the linguistic input providers (accuracy, fluency, and effectiveness of language input from caregivers and teachers, as well as their teaching styles) and the learners' social and cognitive styles. But overriding teaching and learning styles is the context in which these styles are developed, what

Guangwei Hu calls "the culture of learning" (2002). Since we are dealing here with English and Mandarin Chinese as foreign languages, the culture of learning would include a complex web of teaching and learning styles and strategies developed inside the cultures of the learners and their teachers, from sustained tradition and intense experience, whose scope reaches beyond the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Viewed from this perspective, pedagogical methodologies developed in one culture of learning would have to be *negotiated* in order for them to have a chance to succeed in another culture of learning.

Communicative Language Teaching

Developed in response to happenings in theoretical linguistics in the 1970s, with the switch in emphasis from syntax to pragmatics, and the salience given to *context*, as opposed to utterance, and to *communicative*, as opposed to linguistic *competence*, in the study of language phenomena, CLT stresses fluent, appropriate and effective, rather than just haltingly accurate, communication in real social contexts. It makes total intuitive sense that communicative competence should be the primary goal of foreign language teaching (when it is not restricted to foreign language reading, a smaller but perfectly honorable goal). It is also true that traditional language-teaching methodologies have not been very successful in achieving that goal. Whatever the varied reasons for that situation, CLT was viewed as the solution. It soon became close to a dogma throughout the world.

Several principles set apart CLT from more traditional language teaching methodologies (e.g., audiolingual, grammar translation, etc.), and although CLT is not as monolithic a methodology as it may at times seem, the following can be considered some of its basic tenets. They have to do with the kind of language used,

the role of the teacher, and that of the learner.

1. Communicative competence (rather than knowledge of the linguistic system);
2. Primacy of discourse (rather than of word and sentence);
3. Ability to communicate effectively (over and above accuracy);
4. Student-centered experience-based learning (guessing, improvisation, discovery);
5. Intensive experience with real-world tasks (information gap, discussion, improvisation, simulation, with authentic texts, in authentic situations);
6. Teacher as co-communicator (partner in an ongoing conversation).

Two Trenches, Two Views

The first two authors of this discussion are almost mirror images of each other: Ying Ding, a highly competent non-native speaker of English, teaches English as a foreign language at the Nanjing University of Finance and Economics; Suzy Shen Zien, a native speaker of Chinese long immersed in the American culture, teaches Chinese 101 at the Catholic University of America. Both of them brought CLT into their classrooms: the former into a classroom of 30 to 60 students; the latter into a much smaller group of 10 to 15. We will take their two classroom situations as the locus where CLT comes into contact with the cultures of learning represented by the learners and the teachers.

In the Chinese classroom, English is a college requirement: among other requirements for graduation, the students must pass the College English Test Band Four (CET4), which includes all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), as well as translation. The students, 30 to 60 strong in one large classroom, with the seats facing the front desk, stand up to answer questions. They have already taken several years of English in high school, and yet their answers

are short, one or two words. The teacher corrects them from the front desk. She has learned English through grammar-translation, an important component of the college entrance examination, and continued her English-teacher education in the communicative method, or at least her methods class promoted CLT as *the* teaching method, which she attempts to put into practice in her classroom teaching.

She puts grammar aside, in favor of real-world familiar topics and free-wheeling conversation with her students and is confronted with hesitation, monosyllabic answers, even downright refusal to join the conversation. The students' anxiety is readily apparent. They complain that they are not being prepared for the exam, that they "learn nothing" in class, and prompt her to give more grammar and writing instruction. Their goal is instrumental: to pass CET4. In spite of their teacher's attempts, the students' stance is in direct contradiction to the basic tenets of CLT.

In the American classroom, the students are taking one semester of Mandarin Chinese, for the first time in their lives, as preparation for a semester in China, at a university where the language of instruction is English. It is a small class, with the students sitting around a long table, ready to ask questions about Chinese and its speakers; ready and very eager to learn a few contact phrases, "hello," "good-bye," "thank you"; ready, unreasonably ready, to converse with much less language than their Chinese counterparts. With a different but equally instrumental goal in mind—to get some knowledge of Mandarin Chinese in the context of Chinese culture—although unaware of the amount of work it would take to get to the point where they could converse in Chinese and most likely not ready to put in that amount of effort, the American students are well disposed towards CLT. The teacher uses the communicative method, even though most of the

communication is, naturally, in English, and it is about the Chinese writing system, the four tones, and words with their corresponding English translation.

Here are two classrooms, the very set-up of which betray cultural beliefs; two teachers ready to launch into CLT; and two very different learner attitudes developed in one culture and expected to be used profitably across cultures. This is the place where Confucius meets Socrates, a shorthand for referring to the two cultures of learning, with the caveat that while Confucian thinking does indeed permeate the entire Chinese educational philosophy, the Socratic method of dialog and debate does not occupy such an elevated position in Western education, least of all in language teaching.

Confucius said, "To say when you know and to say you do not know when you do not know—that is wisdom." Reverence for knowledge—true, deep knowledge—keeps the Chinese students from chit-chatting freely in a language they know imperfectly. They do not believe that a teacher-initiated conversation will increase their knowledge, while the teaching of grammar will. In fact, they find it odd that the teacher, the very source of knowledge, would want to talk with them, novices. Socrates did not claim that to know is to know very little. And yet, the American students appear to be quite satisfied with very little knowledge of a language, and quite willing to get involved in an English conversation peppered with newly acquired Chinese words. There is an impatience in the way American students approach the language-learning task that is quite absent with the Chinese students. One might venture to say that to the former CLT comes naturally, while the latter appear resistant to it. It thus becomes quite apparent that CLT, developed within the Western culture of learning, cannot be applied wholesale to the Chinese culture of learning.

Grinding an Iron Bar into a Needle: The

Chinese Culture of Learning

When they start school, Chinese children speaking Mandarin or Cantonese Chinese, in many cases various local dialects, are first taught a sort of phonetic alphabet based in the Roman alphabet—*Pinyin*, meaning "spelling sound"—which provides the bridge between the sounds and tones of the language they already know and the Mandarin characters. Ironically, it is the Roman alphabet that offers them entrance to Mandarin Chinese literacy.

In the eighteenth century *Kangxi Dictionary* there are over 40,000 Chinese characters, 6,000 to 7,000 of which would define a well-educated person, but only 2,000 are needed for functional literacy. By the end of sixth grade, the children will have learned how to read and write about 2,500 characters. In order to put what appears to be a huge task in its rightful perspective, we need to add that at the basis of the characters there are 214 radicals; and a particular character will have a different meaning depending on the tone. (*Ma*, the character that is always used as an introduction to the language, repeated three times, each time with a different tone, makes the statement "Mother scolds the horse.") A word most often contains two characters; e.g., the characters for sun and moon create the word "bright." The radicals and the full-fledged characters that are at the basis of the words are written with a variety of strokes. Several traditions of Chinese calligraphy, from the times when the writing was done with brushes and ink, have instituted techniques for writing the strokes: top to bottom, left to right, horizontal before vertical. Chinese children spend many long hours and special notebooks practicing individual strokes, which will build into radicals, then into full characters; learn their meanings under the different tones; and then combine them into different words.

This cursory account of the learning task of primary school children in China in their introduction

to literacy (and by implicit comparison, the literacy task in front of same-age American school children), oversimplified as it is, is meant to provide an explanatory background for the Chinese culture of learning, at least in its traditional form, for even in its simplified form, the acquisition of Chinese literacy is an impressive iron bar, to quote the Chinese saying at the head of this section, compared to the much thinner bar facing American children when they acquire literacy.

Education has claimed a central role in Chinese culture since ancient times, one internalized by both educated and unschooled people, all aware that education provides rewards at all levels, from personal fulfillment to social recognition and the development of a strong nation, a model to other nations. The high regard for education—"Everything is low, only education is high"—is enshrined in Confucian teachings, which view education in terms of intellectual and moral development; of accumulation of knowledge from authoritative texts; of a hierarchical relation between teacher and student. The teacher as model and mentor, knower and controller, transmits knowledge. Teachers are viewed, traditionally, as "vessels of knowledge," "sculptors of the future," "engineers of the human soul." The student, on the other hand, receptive and mentally (though not necessarily verbally) active, diligent, patient and perseverant, meticulous and intolerant of ambiguity, is disposed to learn, knowing that "diligence compensates for stupidity." Hu (2002) provides a simple schematic representation of this culture as "The Four Rs" (reception, repetition, review, reproduction) and "The Four M's" (meticulosity, memorization, mental activity, mastery). Thus equipped, teachers and students are prepared for high achievement in a harmonious environment.

Communicative language teaching, developed as it was in an interactive culture of learning and applied

to a different culture, with adherence to most of its basic tenets, creates a mismatch, a disharmony between the culturally perceived role of the teacher and that of the learner, which may undermine the position of the teacher in the classroom and the students' chances for success. The centrality of real-life discourse strains the students' intolerance of ambiguity and puts the teacher at risk of losing face in front of the students, thus throwing both teacher and students into a situation that lacks the sense of security required by the teacher-student relationship within the Chinese culture of learning. Furthermore, starting in the middle of things, by using the language in meaningful ways from the very beginning, therefore "using language to learn language," is at odds with the traditional view of "learning language in order to use the language," and use it not right away, but at some point in the future. Students who are used to "receive, retain, review, and reproduce" are asked to produce before they have received enough, before they are given a chance to review and repeat. Students who are used to paying attention to detail, to memorizing for depth of understanding, students who have little tolerance for approximation, guesswork, and speculation are encouraged to act against their learning styles and strategies shaped by the culture of learning. At the same time, teachers who do not have high sociolinguistic and cultural knowledge of English or who get involved in negotiation and guesswork with the students run the risk of losing face, and unwittingly undermining the learning process.

Context, History, and Negotiation

Just as there are many teacher and student variables at work in learning a foreign language, there are varied contexts in which the learning takes place. The two classrooms used here for illustration of the fit of a pedagogical approach to the participants' cultures of learning are simply that: two contexts. In two large countries

such as China and the United States, there are countless such contexts, in which a myriad of teaching methods are used, successfully or less so. Many have attributed the "resistance" to CLT in China and the relative lack of success in teaching English to the physical context: large classrooms, where interactions cannot be staged with ease; the lack of authentic language materials; some teachers' imperfect mastery of English (e.g., Wu, 2001; Wang, 2002). In the US the use of CLT, in modified forms, for over two decades has not produced miraculous foreign language learning results either, in spite of adequate classroom size, wealth of language materials, and the availability of highly trained teachers. The context is just one additional variable, hardly responsible for the results.

More recently there has been some research into historical considerations (e.g., Shi, 2006; Jiang and Smith, 2008), having to do with the Chinese culture of learning: Are the many assumptions about the traditional stances of teachers and learners still valid? Is Confucian educational philosophy still animating today's generations of Chinese teachers and learners? Not surprisingly, traditions are on the one hand changing, but on the other, and more interestingly, they interact in much more complex ways with people's behaviors. The non-interactive (some call it "mimetic") approach to learning that characterizes Chinese students is not always a direct reflection of *all* Confucian-derived features and can be overcome by ingenious teaching methods. Likewise, in the case of the interactive, dialogic, dialectical features of the so-called Socratic method, it may just be that an eagerly interactive style has survived in most American students and teachers, thus impelling people to think that CLT is the ideal method for foreign language teaching.

And yet, if we could obtain perfectly symmetrical foreign language teaching contexts, where all the many variables are held artificially equal, and use CLT, in its

main tenets, with American and Chinese students, one would still predict a better fit in the former than in the latter.

The question that would have to concern theoreticians and practitioners alike is this: what is the final result and does purity of methodology have anything to do with it? Expert teachers, such as the first two authors, want good learning results, and know that in order to get there one has to negotiate teaching conditions and methods, sometimes in keeping with the perceived culture of learning of students and teachers, and other times against it. In the Chinese classroom, the teacher replaced unsuccessful individual interaction with group work, in keeping with the learners' group ethos, but a good part of the learning process still took place with the teacher facing the class and asking questions and the students responding individually. In the American classroom, the students were pleased to learn some interactive phrases right away, but soon enough they got used to that most dreaded of methods: memorization. When it comes to foreign language learning, no matter what the setting, interaction and memorization bring Socrates and Confucius together (Scollon, 1999), as expert teachers and highly successful foreign language students know all too well.

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Clunkers: Utilizing Transgressions of Grammatical Propriety in English101

hank you for the teach of you. You teach is the best and you is the kind. I don't know when we'll to see you again but I hope it's nice to meet you. This is the nicest professional compliment I've ever received. It is also a series of transgressions of grammatical propriety which I like to call "clunkers." The obvious grammatical issues notwithstanding, I treasure this wondrous expression from a first-level student after a six-week term at the American

University Alumni Association Language Center (AUA) in Bangkok, Thailand. The Thai are open, sociable people who easily express their affections. They taught me a great deal about the pleasure that can be gained in language acquisition and communicative competence. In the mid-1980s AUA was a language factory with at least 1500 students taking one hour lessons every day for six-week terms over a sixteen-term program, at the end of which the (diminished number of) Thai students were competent in American English. An American enterprise, it was intended both for linguistic development and for cultural exchange. It was in fact a laboratory where I was able to practice techniques of improving conversational American English and linguistic acquisition. The pleasure that my Thai students took in their conversations helped me to realize what an excellent philosophical and pedagogical tool socialization is. By "socialization" I mean positively reinforcing techniques of communication and composition through repeated practice at sharing ideas and refining expression. By socializing'
their study, students can be pleasantly engaged with learning. When the student is comfortable, relaxed and trusting in the classroom, both the narrowest of objectives, and the widest of philosophical goals, can be achieved. That's the kind of classroom I want to cultivate.

I practice socialization to some extent in all of my classes, none more so thanEnglish 101, which I have been teaching for the last two-and-a-half years at Montgomery College in Rockville. Maryland. Over the years, I have utilized an array of socialization techniques, such as devoting the first classes to simply getting to know each other, holding frequent brainstorming sessions, allowing open question periods, working in pairs and groups, and discussing current events. All ideas are welcome, as are a sense of humor and openness to others. These techniques facilitate the

respectful exchange of ideas and it only takes a few weeks to get the students into a coherent, striving, supportive group. American students are particularly receptive to the "socialization of ideas" system, which gives them both freedom and structure, as well as mild criticism when necessary.

I never feel rushed to get my students through the first weeks. As they discover their commonalities and differences, they realize that they are each on a similar path. This is always an undercurrent in my class' We are on a journey together. We're moving forward. We're not looking back. I've attempted to get them to see the writing process as something infinitely repetitive, and endlessly varied. Yet, as we approach the middle of the term, there is one more task that awaits them. They've worked on thesis statements and microcosmic examples. They've challenged themselves to memorize and comprehend a vocabulary building system. They've begun to practice peer-editing, but they still have progress to make in that regard. They've turned in drafts of their work and received my response to their individual work. But they haven't seen each other through my eyes; they haven't seen themselves through my eyes.

So we come to an ethical dilemma. How does the teacher reveal his or her critical feelings for the group's progress? I've guided and encouraged them through the first socialization procedures. Almost entirely, they have discovered value in my techniques. They have seen how my philosophical foundations are supporting a positive structure for their learning. But they haven't borne the withering scorn of my general regard for their work. So how do I reveal my feelings if they are strongly in the negative, or more correctly, if I know how seriously incoherent their efforts have been? They know they've been incoherent. But they haven't socialized that knowledge yet. They've been trying to keep it a secret.

I'd been practicing socialization techniques for

many years before this dilemma even presented itself to me. I was blissfully ignorant of this issue of student responses, until I was asked about clunkers at a job interview. The interrogator wondered if perhaps it might be intimidating to students to have to face their teacher's criticism publicly, surrounded by their classmates. Or more particularly, he took issue with the manner of introducing my criticism of their individual failings. I don't remember exactly how I answered the question, but I ended my response with, ". . . but I'm sensitive to their vulnerabilities." And the panel of interviewers all exhaled in agreement with this tidbit of pedagogical correctness. (I didn't get the job.)

It's important to be sensitive to the students, all of them, at all times. And this is a thankless task. But attention to error is the concern of discipline, and writing is a discipline. One must be trained to regulate oneself; attention to mistakes, especially those made commonly, is the essence of teaching, of learning. So, I haven't changed my approach; I've just consciously framed it so that it is more clearly constructive and not destructive. Thanks to that inference from an interviewer I can express my philosophical foundation, my belief that when groups are socialized they are willing to regard their observed failures as opportunities for correction. They share the blame in the case of clunkers because they recognize the mistakes others make; they have made them too. And they are entertained by their mistakes.

So, what are clunkers? In fact, I only came to that appellation after many years of working on such sentences, which I would otherwise mark with a red 'awk' (awkward) on the papers. I was a poor editor in that sense. I never bothered to recognize the specific problems in badly rendered sentences because it would have slowed me down horrendously. I've attained a certain level of aptitude after many years of grading, and I am able to identify the problems of poorly

constructed sentences better now than even five years ago.

Because I am more adept with what the problems are, I am better able to make public the many awkward sentences I see. I do this during the second and third assignments of each term. I don't introduce clunkers after the first essay because there is too much else to attend to at the beginning of the term. But as I grade the second draft of the second essay, I select one sentence (especially egregious in transgression of coherence) from each paper and transcribe it into my clunker file. Now, after two-and-a-half years, I have enough to write thisessay.

I don't always get a clunker from every student. And some of my students are so competitive and intent on improvement that they challenge themselves not to have any awkward sentences in their third essay. This is a development I encourage. Also, I exclude any sentence produced by a person who is clearly in the throes of second-language acquisition. (The single exception in this paper is the epigraph by my lovely first-level Thai student, who communicated so effectively with her warm-hearted and sincere clunkers.) These folks don't need a humiliating public exposure of their struggles. Usually I have between fifteen and twenty clunkers from any given assignment. I print these out, photocopy them, and distribute them to the class. Then, one by one, I read them out loud, emphasizing the unintended absurdity in their sentences. I tell them that I share these sentences with my wife and we laugh about them together.

The first time, they don't know the clunkers are coming. I never use the word "clunker" before this day. So the responses are genuine. The students are muted at first when they recognize they are represented, but I never attach a clunker to an individual name. No student has ever run out of the classroom in horror, nor sent me an e-mail later saying that I betrayed

her trust. How can you *not* laugh when you see this sentence—*Rich or poor, society can dictate an individuals values, to be accepted in some cultures can cause any man to kill for the glory of being socially accepted.'* Of course, the students are horrified to see their worst sentence made public. But their worst sentence is right there with their classmates' worst sentences. And those sentences are similarly mistaken. So the lesson is learned immediately; in the process of socializing writing, mistakes are inevitable, identifiable, common, and correctable. What is more, they often fall into one of only half a dozen categories. So rather than embarrassment and resentment, quite often the student will acknowledge with an abashed pride, "That one is mine." And they begin to sense that forethought, intention, is a necessary tool in socializing ideas.

So I resolve the ethical dilemma of how to present my criticism of students as a whole by shocking, humiliating, and shaming them *after* they've established a strong social fabric in the classroom. I don't share with students my deeper, philosophical thoughts about clunkers. That's what this paper is for. But one key point that both the student and the reader come to understand is that clunkers are impulsive expressions. Students come to think of them as "first drafts, and that's helpful even if they appear in a second draft. Despite their training, students at eighteen rarely understand that writing is like sculpting. People can't simply spew out excellent writing, just as they can't carve a figure in stone without some effort.

The clunker is the first rough cut of the stone, the impulsive expression of the idea the student has. It's worth focusing on that word "impulsive" for a moment, a characteristic that we are trained to think of as bad. Things that are impulsive are not thought through; they're enacted without concern for their consequences. But they do represent thought. It's the *action* that constitutes the offense. The *idea* of it offends no one.

I could announce that I have impulsively thought of slashing my wife with a butcher knife, but if I don't perform that action I haven't done any harm (although you might recommend me to my priest/rabbi/preacher/yogi/confessor). So I think of impulses as natural and value neutral, neither good nor bad as ideas.

Clunkers are the vehicle for a socialized classroom to learn to recognize the difference between impulsive expression and refined, tempered communication. I think clunkers come as a revelation to students who, upon witnessing the incoherence of the people around them (people they have been befriending over the last weeks), recognize themselves, their impulses and mistakes. This is one of the main purposes in my English 101 classroom, to get students to see that they are not the center of the world, that they are participants, with many millions of others, in society.

It's a question of maturity, but it's also a question of the intent of the teacher. I don't insist that all or most teachers fail in this regard; most or all *people* fail in this regard, especially in early twenty-first century America. I refer to Parker Palmer and Stephen Glazer for more on this point of "spirituality" in teaching, and return to clunkers. There is nothing inherently wrong about an impulse, or a clunker. A clunker is an impulsive expression of an idea the student wishes to socialize, to make others understand. If a young person can be trained to recognize her impulsive expressions, she can learn to control her mind and life in ways she never could before; expression (the highest virtue of the materialist culture) becomes communication.

The way to that nascent realization is recognizing how clarity is hidden within the impulsive expression, obscured by the garbled language and punctuation. There are two ways to achieve this – repeated practice at finding out what is wrong with a clunker, and repeated practice fixing it. So after we read the clunkers *(Being jobless leads to poverty and poverty leads to family*

being homeless leads to family not being able to get the proper amount of nurture and nutrition or being malnutrition in order to live properly.) and laugh about them, I separate the students into groups and assign them the task of making clear what the impulsive expression has distorted. That is easy with this kind of clunker: *'ome people think that becoming a fashion designer is very easy but I think that it is not that easy because it is very hard to become a fashion designer*: the problem is redundancy —it says the same thing over and over and again and again. So the students recognize the problem and label it, redundancy.

The next step is to fix it. If the problem has a label, why not label the corrective practice as well? Perhaps there already is an editing term for expunging redundancy, but as of this writing, I don't know it. My label for correcting redundancy is "compression." Get rid of the useless words and get more power from fewer words. Pack more meaning into less space. That's ultimately what poets do. But with prose, all the writer has to do is attain coherence. So the students practice compression to socialize their impulsive expressions. The sentence above might be corrected thus, "Despite the glamour of the fashion industry, it's hard to become a fashion designer."

Society demands that we abide by certain practices of coherence. Steve Martin once thought it would be interesting to teach your child all the words of English wrong so that when they got to school and had to go to the bathroom, they would say, "May I mambo dogface to the banana patch?" We are social animals and we succeed best when we communicate according to society's dictates. Clunkers put the average eighteen-year-old American's impulsive expression next to society's demand for coherence, and the results are both hilariously entertaining and acutely instructive.

Repeated practice with clunkers also reveals that there are a limited number of mistakes that are made.

After redundancy, the other most frequent mistakes in my classes are sentence fragments (and their complement run-on sentences), misplaced modifiers, tense and number agreement, passive voice instead of active, etc. And their frequency reveals something about the impulsive expressions of eighteen-year-olds. They think their impulses have significance no matter how they express them. However, they are frustrated to find that they are not taken seriously or don't connect the way they wish they could. There are also trends in contemporary entertainment and technology which encourage their untempered, impulsive expressions. So a student must come to a conscientious acceptance of the need to pay attention to the formulation of their ideas before they socialize them. The classroom is the practice field, to make mistakes and tend to them, to learn to refine the techniques they use to express themselves.

After the second session of clunkers, I introduce an aphorism to the class which summarizes this idea in big language that both intimidates the students and beckons them to understand better. I tell them, "Coherence is a self-conscious decision made manifest in action." I interpret this in various ways to them, but the idea is that they have to choose to socialize their ideas in such a way that they can be understood by others. They have to intend to say what they mean, and it takes a conscious effort, just as it takes an effort to wrangle communication from a clunker.

We do two sets of clunkers (after the second and third essays of the term) because repetition illuminates this tendency of a few popular mistakes that can be easily rectified with awareness. It might even be that the second lesson of clunkers is the truly masochistic one, because the students know they're coming. They have been talking about their papers with each other for weeks, writing thesis statements on the board, discussing research issues (by the third

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