

On Learning Languages

Assignment #3: *A Death in the Family*-Inspired On Essay

What There are only a few parts to mankind that are both universal and unique to a any group of people. Culture. Race. Religion. Beliefs. But perhaps the cornerstone of any society is language. Language, which gives a means of communication. Language, which assimilates cultural views. Language, which is always expanding in its diversity. And from these facets of language stem the progeny of literary artists, lead to portmanteaus of modern culture, and make evident the importance of this very class: the study of language.

But the beauty of language cannot come without knowledge of the it. Languages, being inherently complex, make the acquiring of a new one very difficult. Rather than the simple facts picked up in other classes, such as mathematical proofs or historical conspiracy theories, no element of language can completely be learned in just a few days, but rather months or years.

With rote memorization as my strongest suit in learning, this has come very difficult to me. The subtleties of learning language have been a constant struggle for me since my inception; I was born to Fujianese immigrants in an American society. Chinese and English fought to be expressed, but the English Second Language program gave a decisive reinforcement to English, which has since always been at the tip of my tongue. And Spanish was always weak, beginning in sixth grade and never being enforced outside of class.

Perhaps this linguistic deficiency of mine is because of the great depth of language. It scares me. The fact that it is never ending, it has no true rules, it has no definitive meaning, makes it something that can't be learned. It seems that it can only be experienced: the angry rants of great playwrights felt like blistering wounds or the longing nostalgia felt as though it were raining teardrops from the stanzas of renowned poets. To me as a child, it seemed a hopeless venture to attempt mastering the great learning curve even of English, never mind others.

But language does not end at the word. Body language, for example, is a widely-used system of communication, a system of winks and nods that convey a feeling with a message, without the need of adjectives and nouns. But I was exposed to another form of language about

the same time my primary tongue became English: that beautiful mixture of song and rhythm in what we call “music.”

And although music is made from a diverse group of instruments, some of which are unique to certain cultures, music has evolved into what some call the “universal language”: it has one common written form, is practiced and encouraged in every civilization, and it is accepted and recognized by anyone. Everyone.

Through the study of music, I learned as much as I could have through a cultural study. Chopin’s “Revolutionary” *Étude op. 10 no. 12* painted a much better picture of the anguish of Polish citizens as they were defeated in war. Likewise, Beethoven’s *Für Elise* is an internationally recognized love story, narrated as well as any author. And *Minstrels* by Debussy is a concise, playful piece, part of a genre not common in literature.

Interestingly, what incited my greater success in music than in ordinary language was that I had little insight on the matter. The boy I was eleven years ago was stubborn and reluctant to attend the piano lessons that were forced upon him. Little did I know that I was something much greater; this, the hindrance to my English education, was actually benefitted by my ignorance! When I realized this, that I had already gone a substantial distance and had not yet given up, this propelled me further into my musical studies.

Meanwhile, in school, academics began to get more complex: the laws which governed our lives were smashed. English no longer had to be written in a five-paragraph essay, as we were dictated to do in the elementary and early middle schools. But rules were being broken, to my astonishment, in other classes as well: mention of Schrödinger and Heisenberg with their theories of quantum mechanics suddenly made the definition of matter much more ambiguous than it seems in this world of physical truths, and math began to gain literally unreal numbers. Nothing was so black-and-white as it used to be; the fact that I was learning with assumptions instead of facts in even the world of mathematics gave the inspiration to follow through with the hypothetical universe of books and other literature.

Still, though, this increase in sophistication was bothersome. Was there really nothing that could be simpler, that could adhere to my strengths and build on my weaknesses?

That was when I stumbled across the newest generation of languages. A generation of languages with a purpose; a specific, directed purpose aimed to serve a single cause, but a cause that is expanding exponentially. These languages are entirely functional languages, with words fewer than even the Orwellian “Newspeak” but still containing an array of nouns, verbs, modifiers. There exist synonyms, alternative grammar structures, syntactic paradigms that accommodate different people who use the language and fit better with different ideas.

These languages, however, are not simply abridged versions of ordinary languages; nay, they can convey logic and ideas, but there is no art. There is no elegance in breaking rules; this will simply result in a misunderstanding. Repetition is discouraged because of these languages’ DRYness — the “Don’t Repeat Yourself” ideology. And best of all, there is but clarity in its words; what are known as “abstractions” are simplistic representations of complex ideas on the surface, but dig down a little deeper and the reasoning behind it is revealed. For such reasons, these words are divine: manageable, simplistic, logical, simple, exact, concise, wondrous words that make up the text known as code.

It’s been well-documented that programming languages, in their attempt to make easier the drastic link between man’s mind and machine’s motions, is no piece of cake even for the most experienced software technicians. Even after many years coding, there is little-to-no physical beauty or elegance (although there is quite a bit of humor in the programming community); what is most beautiful, however, is in the integrity of its design. Never did programming really stray from its original purpose of communication as spoken word or music had had, nor did it ever become anything more complex than it needed to be. On the other hand, programming is incredibly up-to-date — in fact, the news applications and social media platforms are the reason why *the rest of society* is caught up to the same level that modern technology has achieved — as it changes to adopt new technological and social practices. Thus, an incredible society of programmers — separated into and united with the different “cultures” of various programming languages — has formed based on these principles, changing only to preserve the purity of meaning and function.

And these languages are still languages in that they have a community of writers and learners. It is feasible to learn an entire language — down to every last word — for some simpler

computer languages. Standards exist for and between languages to ensure conformity and similarity, while each individual language has its own unique points. As a result, there are millions of programmers today that just code “for fun,” myself included.

And although the problem of ambiguity of expression is eliminated by the straightforward syntax in programming, its simplistic structure still allows for higher-order thinking. Perhaps this is because code is so devoid of style or other trifles; this is because the client, the receiver, the translator of these commands is a computer. A man whose job is simply to obey, without thinking or understanding.

Nobody is afraid of communication with inanimate objects: people yell at walls, crush stress-balls, play with food. Now, in the digital age, anybody can a few lines of code that code a game, design a website, or accomplish some other task. There is no end of possibilities, and the mechanical pen-pal one can write to can be at one’s side always: listening to one’s commands, giving feedback to erroneous language, showing the way to helpful resources. Over the course of only a few years, the introverted, inarticulated me became a confident, powerful programmer, a skilled acrobat in the programming playground with the safety of my PC.

In addition to being able to effortlessly create analogies or allusions to the frustration of programming or the epiphanies that usually follow, the coding experience has simply put the language of English in perspective. Writing non-fictional, information-based essays is similar to writing in the programming procedural model, one that is linear and explicit. Inditing elaborative imagery is comparable to the object-oriented programming model, one that focuses on “objects” and every aspect, or “property” that they contain.

Then again, the aforementioned benefits of programming are its shortcomings in English. So while there might be an emphasis on content as a priority, stylistic devices are largely lacking.

[conclusion?]