

'The Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures'

(An address delivered to the faculty of the University of Dallas in October 1990,
before Classics and Modern Languages became separate departments.)

Every now and then as I have passed through the door in the glass wall that separates our departmental office in Carpenter Hall from the corridor, I've caught sight of several rows of slightly skewed letters announcing that I am entering The Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, and I've wondered what all of that means. I take the present moment to be an opportunity for me to wonder about it some more while responding to the charge before us that we all address the question of how we form part of a university.

I don't think I would have great difficulty in convincing you that the department serves efficiently and modestly as handmaid assisting all of you in performing your various functions, whether in the sciences, the arts or the humanities--we all need to use languages as instruments and to know how they work--but you might well resist if I were to assert, as I sometimes do about my own branch of the department, Classics, that it forms the core of the core and that the so-called classical tripos, the tripod all Classicists must sit upon when they are Delphic, consists in the study of the philosophy, literature, and history of an era long before the time when these departments went their separate ways. The discipline therefore could be thought of as exemplary insofar as it might pretend to teach a university how to be a whole. If I were to say such a thing, Philosophy would surely object that I was being very unseemly by trying to wrench the crown from her head, and though I might muss her hair for the moment, in the end I would fail miserably and be cuffed about by her consorts, Theology and Politics, and their ministers to the right and left on the dais, History and Literature. So I'll restrain our departmental aspirations and perhaps lay our claim just to the chaplet that belongs to those who serve the wine, even though not all of you may desire to hold out your cups.

Here, then, is an attempt to explain and exemplify the activities of the department that promote our common interests. Let me proceed in a manner characteristic of us by taking a text and performing an explication. You can see by my proposal to follow this procedure that we are like other departments whose main business it is to teach to read with care and understanding. Most of us I believe think of ourselves as engaged in the same pursuits that Ray DiLorenzo and Glen Thurow described. I mean those that involve the cultivation of imagination and judgment, but perhaps with this difference.

In English or Politics, or Philosophy for that matter and History too, one advances through texts with great, swinging strides, but in our department, especially perhaps in my branch of it, we take little, tentative, baby steps. We have to learn how to walk all over again. Like this. Let me show you by turning to my text--which, under the circumstances, had better be a short one, and it is--just four words, our departmental title: Foreign Languages and Literatures.

First of all, as a practicing grammarian, I notice that among the various departments our title is the only composite plural. That is fine. The title may imply to some of you a lack of unity, but the fact that we are a composite of two (of languages and literatures), as well as a plural, raises for us the issue of how the indefinite dyad mediates between the one and the many, that is to say, language study constantly reminds us of the problem of how we arrange the phenomena into kinds or entities and into groups of kinds or dasses, into εἶδη and γένη. We are obliged to wonder whether or not our grids have artificially frozen what is naturally in flux. When we start, we have to do so from the ground up, for instance in the

case of our title, by reflecting that the word literature implies letters and letters constitute an alphabet, a system of fixed visual symbols imposed on the infinite fluidity of sound, yet a system whose categories are arranged with such economy and clarity that we wonder how they could have been generated by apparent accident rather than made by a designing mind. I am thinking, for instance, of the grid of stop consonants or of the open and close, front and back vowels, and of the principles that describe the formation of groups of entities called syllables.

At the other end of the spectrum of composition the word “literatures” implies the problem of translation. How well do we transfer meaning from a masterpiece in one language to a version of it in another? Even in miniature, is *le mot juste* adequately rendered by “the right word” or is something lost? Just nuances or significant matters of substance? Is there anything to the assertion that we can only speak clearly and fully about being in Greek and German, or that we can’t understand the opposition between fortune and fate without knowing Latin?

Such puzzles prompt us to look at the second word in our title and to ask what is “language”? Through derivation we can define it as the use of the tongue to speak, and the puzzles I just mentioned suggest that the fundamental speech act is naming, identifying classes and kinds according to likeness and unlikeness. We wonder, “How do we name?”

There are three possibilities: first, we give names completely arbitrarily—there is no recognizable connection between a thing and its name. “Achilles” means nothing to us, whether or not it meant anything to his namer. Second, we name by isolating a remarkable characteristic. I think of Ray’s first fictional hero, Swivelhips, or of mine, the lanky, long-legged pitcher with a kick like Warren Spahn’s who released the ball out of a bewildering windmill of limbs. His teammates looked up at him on the mound and called him Highpockets. Third, we do so by transference, by the paradoxical habit of calling something what it is not, that is, by metaphor. Now I think of that figure who roamed through centerfield long ago in Fenway Park, Tris Speaker, so elusive conceptually that he needed two names to describe him, the Grey Eagle and the Spook. When he ran under the ball, he became a poltergeist and a bird of prey, spectral and swift. Or what about the fellow who played later in left? They called him the Splendid Splinter, so total a hitter that he seemed to be a piece of his own bat, Ted Williams.

You can see then that this practice of naming tells us something about the difference between language as qualitative and number as quantitative. Numerical precision applied to speech would require that one word denote only one thing, which would make language impossible. We could never learn it, because the simplest statements would be unutterably complex. The solution of speech is to make use of ambiguity, which gives us the strange result that clarity is the product of the lack of clarity. A man is a hungry, swooping ghost. Naming, therefore, through its deliberate confusions, by bringing unlike things together as if they were alike, instructs us in the nature of the same and the different.

And so we proceed from letters to syllables to words to collections of words called sentences that tie the phenomena together by making statements about subject-predicate relations, and that constitute for us the so-called grammar of being. The third word in our title is an example of such collection, “and”. We are reminded by it of the most common coordinating conjunctions, “and, or, but, for,” and on inspection they reveal to us the cuts between themselves such that we see them to represent four types of connection: copulative, disjunctive, adversative and causal. Then we are led to speculate that there must be at least two other types of coordinating conjunctions, namely the illative and the explanatory, and then we ask whether we should conclude that at this point we have exhausted the possibilities. So from grammar we have been led to logic, or dialectic, and from there we would be led to rhetoric, and to the

consideration of the question raised by Plato's *Phaedrus* of whether or not the articulation of the beings and the communication of the articulation of the beings are complementary or mutually refractory operations. We can't be enticed by the charm of Plato into exploring this question, however, because there is still one word left to explicate, namely, "foreign."

What is the need for this first word in our title? Why can we not learn much of what I have been talking about from the Department of English Language and Literature? We can't, partly, as I have said, because it is singular, but partly also because English is too much our own. Learning could be called coming to know either what we don't know at all or what we don't know that we know. But we think we know English, whether rightly or wrongly, whereas we know that we don't know, say, Tocharian, or Greek.

The foreign has this power, that it penetrates our complacency and awakens our passion for what is strange, whereupon we may discover that the strange is not so distant after all. We may turn out to know what we didn't think that we knew, namely that "foreign" is based on the inter-lingual root "dhwer," whose cognates include English "door," German "Tür," Latin "forum," and Greek θύρα, and whose root meaning is "the entrance to the enclosure surrounding the house proper." So the alien turns out to be just outside our home, our domain. We need only open the door and take one baby step over the threshold to enter it. The difference between strange and familiar is as thin as a two-dimensional plane, but we usually don't know it. In English we tend not even to realize the plane is there, except on those occasions when by a synaptic failure some well-known word suddenly seems odd to us, in sound or spelling or sense, like a shoe put on the wrong foot. Learning a foreign language makes us feel like that all the time—until we get the shoe on right. Then we begin to understand the natural articulation of the foot, the perfect functionality of the artifact, and the power of the two together. Then from the toes up we feel the fluid action of the feet, the knees, and yes, Ray, the hips, and we are running now, spectral and swift, looking for the ball coming in over our shoulder as we head towards the dangerous niche where the flagpole stands in Fenways deep, idiosyncratic center field.

So let that amount to an apology, in an old sense of the word, for the study of foreign languages and literatures. We learn from them not only about languages as a class but also about the act of classification itself, that is to say, about our capacity for collection and division using letters rather than numbers. This is the capacity that enables us to see the whole. When cultivated as a form of inquiry Plato calls it dialectics, and, as I averred at the outset, when practiced aright, such a study might claim to be quite regal.

David R. Sweet
Faculty Meeting, October 16, 1990
Panel Discussion on the question, "How Are We a Uni-versity?"