

MANAGING A ZOO: THE TOTAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE DEPARTMENT

I WISH to begin with my conclusion, which will shortly be yours as well: after thirty-four years in the academy, including eighteen years of managing foreign language departments or programs closely associated with them (like comparative or world literature, linguistics, or culture or civilization units), I know nothing about how to handle cooperative, not to say congenial, academic brothers and sisters who give unstintingly of their time to committees and students, who volunteer to assume uncomfortable schedules, who would rather go without coffee than disregard their office hours, who can never be accused of being self-serving, whose egos are so tiny as to escape detection, who do not know the meaning of the phrase "invidious comparison," who are so research-oriented that you can automatically assume scholarly productivity, whose desire to improve their teaching runs too deep for them to be offended by critical evaluations, who are idealistically indifferent to the nitty-gritty of salary, and who are forever ready to admit that they have snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. After so many years among foreign language faculty, associated with five American universities, I regret my lack of experience with colleagues of this sort; on the other hand, lest all my time and energy seem to have been lost, I occasionally enjoy, like an epiphany, the sudden sensation of having become a wiser man because there are no psychological problems or personality quirks that I have not faced.

It is simply remarkable how rich the academy is in providing experiences. The job of managing a foreign language department, like that of coaching an athletic team, involves the building of character—*your own* character. If approached this way, your responsibilities will provide not only a chance at gratification, whatever the toll, but also a chance at survival, and even at being mildly respected for having survived. Serving as chairman is like being the protagonist in a comedy, who, after being abused, leaves audience and players alike with a smile.

The wrong way to approach a chairmanship is to succumb to the temptation of developing a Balzacian syndrome, of getting to liken every colleague to a different genus of animal you might encounter in a zoo. But has any one of us, really, been in any foreign language department, anywhere, and not recognized a number of distinct zoological types? I have shared this optic with friends, and it was hard not to smile knowingly at the mere mention of typical genera that you are reasonably sure to locate on one campus or another: peacocks for the noble strutters, inordinately proud of their publication lists; anteaters for the myopic ones who seek only the accuracy of minutiae and condescendingly

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replace commas with semicolons; camels for the stuffy intellectuals who look down at you while looking upward to pontificate; weasels for the devious manipulators whose industriousness and reasonableness conceal their predaceous workings; orangutans for the sneering, hairy ideologists who convert all their courses into images of themselves; swans for the departmental poets, proud to paddle aloof in their own ponds, which are so much more private and distinctive than the sea of scholarship; hyenas for the departmental clowns whose distant laughter sets the hangings in your office askew and whose close-range joviality suspends your senses; elephants for the sages who, after you have attempted something bold and risky, look at you with the omniscient stare of memory and placidly turn to make their way to the stacks; cockatoos for the talkers who, with startled surprise, complain about everything from a catalog description to the condition of campus parking lots; giant hamsters for the activists who thrive on the martyred exhaustion of being on every committee on campus, for each of which they have volunteered; polar bears for the cold and silent ones who merely sniff the air around them when they learn that a colleague has published a book; and of course there are the reptiles and snakes—cobras, more often than not, attractive in their brilliance and equally often poisonous. I am sure you recognize these sentient living organisms, as I am sure you have had occasion to identify many more. But, however justified such analogies, it is a mistake—despite the title of my essay—for a chairman to acquire this attitude, because when you walk from one end of the hall to another and feel you are on a safari trail, you have lost the most essential ingredient in your perspective: your sense of comic distance. Needless to say, my colleagues' perception of me everywhere I have been must have inspired some combination of the above likenesses, thereby qualifying me as a Caliban of sorts—but obviously I shall not emphasize this distorted vision.

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Now, you may think you detect some exaggeration in my words, and if you do, you are wrong. You see, during these many years, my experience has not been limited to a single- or double-language department with only seven or eight people or to a comparative literature program with only three or four. In 1976, the University of California, Riverside—under the watchful eye of the UC Statewide Administration—embarked on the experiment of merging a number of units into one department under my chairmanship. (The move reminded me of all the fun we used to have after hours in high school chemistry lab when we experimented with questionable combinations of elements to see what would happen.) Ostensibly, the reason for the move was to save money—a saving that appeared on paper as \$15,000 (hardly earthshaking, as you can see) but one that the university, bemused by the temptations of Parkinson, immediately managed not to realize. The sheer cost of moving us all into the same park—let alone of making the architectural modifications required to accommodate our newly composite perception of ourselves—represented an interesting expenditure. But we are now, on paper, a unit, and this is what we have: language instruction in Latin (ancient and medieval), Greek (Attic, modern, and New Testament), French (old and new), Italian, Spanish (old and new), Portuguese, German (old and new), Russian, and Chinese (Mandarin); upper-division literature courses in most of these areas; a civilization program involving most of these areas; a comparative and world literature program; a linguistics program to which we are the characteristic contributors, though it is interdepartmental; a program in classics, some of whose courses are requirements for our various majors; majors in any number of these areas, including a foreign language major comprising several foreign languages; and graduate programs in five areas, including our two largest, Spanish and comparative literature, which go up to the Ph.D. I am talking about two dozen regular staff members, seven lecturers, thirty teaching assistants, and an overworked non-academic staff of only four, plus two part-time assistants—one for the departmental library, the other for three journals whose editors are members of this unique constellation in the UC firmament.

I tell you all this to suggest that there might be a reason for my ignorance about how to manage a foreign language department, even one on a small campus of this "multiversity" system (though, in percentage terms, Riverside has the second largest graduate enrollment in the UC system). Yet, ignorance aside, I have noticed a few problems about how to relate to the outside and inside worlds. The first lies in the very title of my essay, in the expression "foreign language department," which our colleagues in the sciences take to mean just that: language, grammar (amo, amas, amat), and, at its very best, style—which the camels among us pompously call

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stylistics. Before proceeding with this observation, I may as well introduce immediately a second problem: the social scientists, who on most campuses bristle with discomfort at the mention of foreign language requirements, and the social scientific mind, whose measurement credo has conquered, not to say snowed, the academy. Its main interest apparently lies in creating reasons for measuring anything, for reducing any problem to a mass of shifting statistics and thereby losing sight of most human values and subtleties. I naturally developed a paranoid horror when I was informed by so many social scientists that foreign language study has no tangible or intangible merit, and that in fact it frightens "the best" (!) students away from an institution. So much for defining the excellent student. Now, of course, since language study has been attracting greater attention as a matter of practical necessity in our society, panic runs rampant among our social scientist colleagues. At a recent university senate meeting during which the Educational Policy Committee attempted to reintroduce substantial college requirements—and among them a foreign language requirement—the panic took the form of premeeting caucuses, strategy conclaves, and covert corralling, all of which resulted in a motion to send the proposal back to committee and all of which was pure social scientific gibberish aimed at squelching anything that included this good-student-frightening monster of foreign languages. For your amusement, I shall read this exultation of the measurement credo:

[The reasons for referring back to committee are the following:]

1. To determine [read: measure] the nature of the educational programs elected by students under existing requirements and whether there is a need for the proposed changes;

2. To investigate [read: measure] the probable impact of the proposed changes on educational institutions which have traditionally served as preparatory institutions for this campus;

3. To determine [read: measure] the probable impact of the proposed changes on recruitment and retention of students;

4. To ascertain [read: measure] the impact of these requirements on existing programs;

5. To determine [read: measure] what, if any, additional resources or reallocation of existing resources would be required to implement the recommendations;

6. To examine [read: measure] these requirements in relationship to the major demographic changes taking place in the populations which will be served by this campus in the coming decade.

Managing a foreign language department means putting up with this kind of mentality. How does a chairman respond? Perhaps you try what my vice-chairman encouraged me to do: add a seventh point (after all, 7 is the *numerus perfectus*):

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7. To ascertain [read: measure] the impact of these requirements on the rate of slippage of the San Andreas Fault.

For some reason, the foreign language requirement looms so often as a battle to the death against, as it turns out, those forces that control our society (as our campuses) and that therefore constitute a major problem in our society. In such a struggle, the chairman must act not as a Caliban but, *alla Machiavelli*, as a lion and a fox. I have found it a good strategy to comb my mane while urging my departmental colleagues, who become such valiant, red-blooded standard-bearers during senate meetings on these occasions, to say nothing, for to play the old record of the value of foreign languages in the liberal education impresses no one anymore—not when anything can be measured and turned against you—and even proves counterproductive. At best, I might venture expressing an annoying subtlety to those who complain that a student who studies a foreign language for two years still cannot master it: how many students required to take Chemistry I A-B-C (introduction to the basic principles of chemistry) or Psychology 1-2-3 (introductory psychology) have mastered chemistry and psychology after those exposures, and would they control those subjects after an intermediate year? And the chairman must act like the sly animal as well, keeping a cool and friendly smile and engaging in a certain amount of the courtier's *sprezzatura*, or aloof casualness. Thus, while not shying away from advocacy, I inform my opponents that since foreign languages have been able to hang on (in some instances quite well) in the aftermath of the sixties and seventies and since some of our *leading* institutions have seen their error and returned to their previous ways (because the outside pressures of utility are so dictating anyway) and since pendulums and panache are what they are, "we're here if you want us—otherwise we have enough to do as it is." For the fox, after all, there are grapes and grapes.

But back to the scientists, a rather more academically perceptive lot, for theirs is an art of creation, too, even if by nature and method they lean more toward the isolation than the integration of knowledge. They may not be the prime assessors of values, but they do respect the formation of judgment, after measurement, and in so doing many of them seem more attuned to what goes on in a humanist's mind. Still, they also tend to look on a foreign language department as a dispenser of skills, and to a certain extent they are right. For however much we insist that when we teach a foreign language we teach culture and that when we teach "Language" we teach insights into the psychosociological constitution of various national cultures, I must yet see how this is done in a classroom turned over to a teaching assistant; much less do I see what we as tenured professionals mean by such an assertion, and how we can do what we claim. We have relied heavily and frequently on this glib axiom, repeating it like macaws, yet none of our great methods, from

audiolingual to natural, has injected cultural tints into the pedagogy—that is, not unless "In _____ trinkt man Bier"; fill in: "München" is intended to do the trick.

So much for the outside views with which a manager must cope. From the inside, the problem is enormous. For whether our field is German, classics, French, or Russian, most of us were not really trained as teachers of language. Despite our assistantships and methods classes, our doctorates were based on literary problems and investigations—the summum bonum, what language *does*—and we never saw Jean Seznec teaching French grammar, Kittridge teaching English composition, Werner Jaeger teaching Greek, or Dámaso Alonso teaching Spanish conversation. (I did have John Finley for Greek, but he always spun off discoursing about Thucydides, and I understand that I. A. Richards taught English composition, but, *beau geste* or not, for how long?) How demeaned they would have felt! Therefore, why should not their disciples have matured with the notion that foreign language teaching, like English language teaching, represents merely a disgruntling necessity when you are on the bottom rung of the academic ladder, before you achieve the heady sophistication of tenure?

The personality fantasies of others will always emerge as a chairman's chief problem; in a foreign language department there are many *prima donnas*—sometimes even more than in an English department and more often than not in male clothing—lyrebirds (which have the interesting zoological name *Menura superba*) with spread or gathered plumes who complain that their students do not know the foreign language well enough to engage in refined literary readings, yet who never accept the challenge of teaching grammar without threatening the chairman with utter mismanagement of faculty resources, with that most heinous of crimes, non-cost-effectiveness.

I believe it is time to declare, both to the inside and to the outside, that language has its own *raison d'être*, not as a skill but as a subject, no different from mathematics or physics and as much an ingredient of intellectual history as philosophy, literature, or government. Furthermore, it is time for us to recognize that language teaching is a pedagogical art, like teaching music composition, and that in this field, perhaps more than in any other, success depends ultimately more on personality than on method. Like the accomplished pianist, the language teacher must possess, beneath the acquired craft, the spontaneous gift of performance. This, in the profession, we recognize tacitly, and one of the tasks of the chairman is to balance an active awareness of this reality with all those other practical or expedient realities militating against it.

We then come to the question of literature as literary criticism—an issue that arises not only on the outside of our discipline but, alas, on the inside as well. To the world outside the academy, from the upper agencies of government down, literature means simply something written to be enjoyed for its style and fantasy. It does

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not mean something of value in the viscera of that world—the world of Mideast problems and of racial conflicts, of ecological extermination and of slavery to technology. And, paradoxically, this is just the world to which modern literature extends, since literature has not merely reflected intellectual and spiritual values but indeed stimulated them. A respect for the language that shapes literature endorses exactly the respect and seriousness of the concerns that provide literature with meaning. That literature, which—yes—is an art but is more than an art, should have been pulled away from its human, social, and psychological moorings and left adrift on some esoteric, uncharted waters and that literary study should have left “assessment,” now interpreted only as “measurement,” to the social sciences—these developments remain beyond my comprehension.

But perhaps there is a reason why we men and women of letters find ourselves on distant waters, why committees and commissions of all sorts that grapple with human problems never enlist the authority of our colleagues, even our most prominent colleagues. And the reason is that literary specialization and literary criticism have made us our own worst enemies. As chairmen trying to manage our departments and maintain morale at a reasonable level in the light of declining enrollments in literature courses, we have the tricky duty to convince our colleagues of the dangers posed by our Scylla and Charybdis:

1. The age of the kind of specialization we knew well before and for some time after World War II is over. While specialization as a concept retains an undisputed place among our goals, it is no longer the specialization of the Hispanist who will only teach or direct dissertations on medieval Spanish literature in and tightly around the period of Alfonso el Sabio. Literature, while being itself, enjoys by nature a centrifugal force (not a centripetal pull) and extends to disciplines and forms of human experience beyond itself. If we want to serve our institutions as men and women of letters, we must look at literature as the hub of an interdisciplinary wheel: the new specialty, which frightens so many of our colleagues who feel threatened by the versatile orientation and who can only shape some words about dilettantism to counter it.

2. The game of criticism and criticism of criticism that we play (I use the verb advisedly) is not fun for undergraduates, who have hardly studied literature in high school, who cannot fathom the excitement of our *ludus*, which appears played for its own sake, who—believe it or not—still manage to retain some sensitivity to human values and seek to cultivate them, and whom we must lead to literature by inspiring them to caress the poem or the novel and not by disemboweling it with the scalpel of structures, variants, and abstruse terminologies, which at best we should leave to our graduate students.

It is hard for a chairman who wishes to exercise

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leadership in any way during these days of retrenchment to convince a theory-minded staff that we may not be humanistically serving the universality of our discipline, that our sport of criticism, which all but forgets the original work of art, has alienated more students than we care to admit. If it is our mission both to effect a rerecognition of literature's fundamental role in liberal education and in society and to engage in dialogue beyond our own community to influence the disposition of human problems on every level, we might well start thinking of what we really mean by literature, what we mean by appreciating it—let alone understanding it, its uses and purposes and aims and beauties, in short, its place in the humanities and in society.

So much for the broader, theoretical problems that I have tried to cope with over the years. There are, of course, a number of practical, concrete annoyances that pursue a chairman with gnat-like regularity. Fortunately, in the UC system I do not face the divine decision of whom to reward with an increase in stipend. I face more earthly problems—for instance, how to shape coherent schedules, coherent not for the sake of the total picture of our offerings and the times and intervals at which they should be offered but coherent for those instructors who find incoherent any schedule requiring them to be on campus five or even four days a week. The simplest way to handle this difficulty is to make all schedules incoherent; this kind of incoherence makes for the most beautifully coherent overall scheduling you have ever seen.

Consistent counseling is another problem, not because the students are misinformed when they *are* counseled, but because they find it difficult to locate professors at the prescribed times designated as office hours, which most professors mulishly claim to keep all year, “barring an exception or two.” Presence in one's office seems to betray a loss of dignity; no tiger, after all, likes its cage. I have come to suspect that this cavalier attitude toward counseling is endemic to the species of professors of literature, since I also remember well my undergraduate and graduate days when I was surprised to learn from classmates that professors of science could be reached any time; never did I hear a complaint about accessibility to science faculty. Other than appealing to accountability and good sense and referring to the close correlation between availability and retention (let alone attraction) of majors, I have no remedy to suggest. I have, however, set up an orientation program at the beginning of each year, complete with international refreshments, which at least has the virtue of providing for early acquaintance, and, through the vulpine strategy of conviviality, of bringing about unavoidable academic contact.

Then there are the questions, on the one hand, of innovation or innovative courses and, on the other, of changes in major structures to make for more solidity in what we already have. Both these enterprises, innovation

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and solidification, are greeted with conspicuous, nose-twitching diffidence by our colleagues, who, even if avant-gardists, idolize the status quo. The elephants head for the stacks. Yet, since there is no way any department can dispense with modification, a chairman must appear to walk in both directions, crablike, not only suggesting new courses or setting up mechanisms for their suggestion but strengthening existing programs by implementing changes that will give the old structure new luster. Thus we have managed in my department, after several academic plans, to add both a lower-division classics requirement (Greek and Roman literature in translation) to any major in a single literature and a common course for these majors in analysis and criticism. Similarly, we have enriched the civilization tracks in the various languages with a common introductory course and a culminating senior seminar, and we have added courses in linguistics (along with the other required courses in civilization and literature) to a language major in two or three foreign languages. As for innovation, our best successes have involved, not the by now tired and worn uses of multimedia (acceptable only to a certain point), but the establishment of special courses, not necessarily relating to any single major but relating to being educated in the humanistic tradition, such as English Word Derivations (perhaps one of the most interesting courses to give) or Mythology and Folklore—both subjects related to literature as well—or, of course, interdisciplinary courses, in line with what I said previously: a course in literature and law or a course in literature and institutions, which has sometimes opened many avenues by tying in legitimately with a flourishing program in another department or college. The problem is to convince your colleagues, first, of the academic validity of such pursuits and, second, of the excitement of teaching in these areas, so that you can force them, occasionally, out of the perfunctory, crustacean shell of, say, French Literature of the XVIIIth Century. Not that the latter course is useless—but the pages of our notes do yellow so terribly.

Perhaps the one word that defines the matter of managing a foreign language department is "perspective," which means helping to forge the intellectual perspectives of our discipline(s) as well as keeping safari personalities and game-park administrative issues in perspective. For example, who has attended a staff meeting to discuss the possibility of a merit increase or the promotion of a colleague and not been both surprised at the many self-serving, self-protective comments and baffled by the extent to which we resemble Chekhovian characters all talking past one another? Who has not encountered the medievalist who is unwilling to judge the modernist because modernism is "out of my field" but who easily expresses an opinion on the colleague holding to a contrary ideology? Who has not questioned the mandated importance student evaluations have acquired in our personnel review process and, by extension, the

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wisdom of the welter of other evaluations (not only of students judging professors but of professors students [this one, of course, is legitimate], faculty their administrators, staff A staff B, chairs their faculty, faculty their chairs, etc., not to mention one of those many academic jocularities: faculty flea picking in self-evaluations), which liken us, as one of my friends says, to a pack of dogs constantly sniffing at each other? What chair has not grown impatient with faculty—in language departments so often the foreign-born—treating secretaries as less than competent professionals with important responsibilities of their own? In fact, what chair has not ultimately discovered that most of the nonacademics, meaning the secretaries and administrative assistants, are wiser than the academics, and frequently more imaginative, in many areas and aspects of the campus operation that the academics are called on, in "duly constituted senate committees," to regulate and implement with their "wisdom"? And what chair has not, after years of experience, learned to see through an extramural letter of recommendation or assessment, particularly in a foreign language department? Eventually we all come to recognize the Hispanic superlatives of *personalismo*, the Italian acerbic partisanship, the French tactful denigration, the British studied and gentlemanly objectivity leaning slightly to the critical, the German pedantically critical circumspection finally leaning toward the positive. To be a chairman means to maintain these perspectives, realizing the probability of their being valid four out of five times, and to try, usually unsuccessfully, to communicate them convincingly to others, chiefly to administrators.

Still, the main problem in managing the zoo centers around dealing with your immediate colleagues: the problem of personnel management greatly intensified by a chair's powerlessness and severely limited authority, now compounded by the steady state of staffs locked in by tenure. As my chancellor graciously put it in disagreeing with my assumption that his job was in the long run more difficult than mine: "Not so, because I can fire all the people around me who do not come through, whereas you can't do the same at your end." In a sense, there is a positive side to the inability. But it exists at the expense of not being able to mold, except after trying efforts, what you and a few others (too few, generally) know should be molded for advancing the welfare and stimulating the improvement of your unit. Stability should never doze off into stasis, the first step toward stagnation. The pond needs fresh water all the time, and full professors, as an MLA official observed recently, resemble rhinoceri: it takes them a while to catch up with reality, being as they are one of the handicapped groups. Tenure damages the mind.

I need not recall for you, however, Fénelon's dictum that all generalities are false, including this one; but I wish to remind you that the last phrase tells us that there is truth in every generality and that there can be

much of it. To manage a foreign language department involves guarding carefully and constantly against every little truth inside every uncharitable generality. In a large and diversified department such as mine, the problems multiply. Since we go all the way from ancient Greek to modern Chinese and since, I was led to believe, this kaleidoscopic arrangement has caught the attention of other foreign language departments, I shall conclude with a description of just how this metropolis is managed, that is, organized. Given current trends on many campuses, your own department might become involved in a merger, and you might wish to know—for whatever it is worth—how we have coped with such a development. Zoological jocundities apart, we have managed with considerable success, on balance. To follow our procedure, you first divide the department into programs: a French program, a Russian one, comparative literature, Italian, and so on (we have fifteen, including distinct classics, Latin, and Greek programs). Some, obviously, will enjoy more faculty than others. You make sure that you have many faculty overlaps, as many as the qualifications of your colleagues permit, so that a professor of Spanish may be not only on the Spanish program staff but also, say, on the classics program staff. You appoint a coordinator for each program to act as a minichairperson, so that the actual chairperson becomes a minidean. The department approves all matters of substance for the various programs, either at a meeting or through circulation of memoranda. You appoint various departmental committees—one for the library, another for lecturers and symposia, and so on—and a language coordinator to head a committee to oversee all matters pertaining to language instruction, laboratory included, in the department. You also appoint—very important—an advisory board, like a cushion or a buffer state between nations, to stand between you and the poised leopards across the hall, to advise on all internal and external questions of consequence; as minidean you must adjudicate many matters of inevitable unpopularity, and the unit's welfare is premised on your ability to hide behind the collective advice of your board. You also appoint a graduate-study committee, made up of all the graduate advisers, to handle or help standardize all graduate matters in the department. And periodically

you appoint a planning committee to propose modifications and new directions, thus ensuring the influx of fresh waters and generating in everyone a continued sense of basic involvement in the movement and growth of the department.

I have found that this type of organization permits more significant relations with the dean, so long as the dean is convinced that you are honest, that you will not ask for ten dollars when you actually need nine. And there are advantages to department mergers, despite the interlanguage and -program tugs of war that invariably arise. Clearly, a large department like ours, by virtue of its voting numbers, carries considerable political clout in college and senate meetings. And, despite all the difficulties I have cited, I can say, in this fifth year of the merger, that a number of language people *can* learn and that the department *has* grown, not necessarily in enrollments but intellectually as a unit. With encouraging frequency, I find there is less chauvinistic gazing than there used to be under separate roofs, and through this modified optic some have even felt the joy, you might say, of overcoming the chauvinism. Some attitudes *have* changed, and a fair amount of teamwork *has* been visible. Perhaps the psychology of this kind of collectivization seems more dignified than that associated with unionism, or perhaps our instincts to expand our knowledge become suddenly awakened from their atrophy. Whatever the case, I have reason to look on the merger concept positively, even though I still see us as a far cry from an ideal nexus of enterprises and even though the image of the zoo (held in check with distressing difficulty) continues to defy eradication. If a large, combined department is organized so that every single member engages in some phase of the operation (the posts must be kept rotating, of course), then by necessity much communication will take place. And communication is *always* the first step in the right direction. The positive signs are there. Yet I personally have to learn how best to take advantage of them. And to the extent that I remain an Aeneas at sea, still groping for his Latium, I can say that I know nothing about how to manage, in this tarnished tower that once was ivory, what may conceivably turn out to be the provocative incongruity of the total foreign language department.