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AHS Capstone Annotation
10 May 2006

Understanding the Context of my Contextual Study

Background

It is no secret that the understanding of a culture is essential to true understanding of a language. To learn a language without understanding the associated culture is like an engineering student learning math without understanding the context of its application: it's wonderful to learn something pure and academic, but what good does it do without the knowledge of how to use it?

To gain some perspective on this approach, one needs to understand the experience of a typical language student in America. A class has a teacher, students, and a textbook. Sometimes the teacher is a native speaker of the language, sometimes not. Over the course of academic periods – quarters, semesters, years – the class follows the textbook, learns grammar, memorizes vocabulary, and periodically synthesizes everything in a required writing assignment or dramatic presentation. Often, the culmination of this education is a standardized test, whether an Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or foreign language exam. Thus for success on these metrics, all standardized language education must follow this path.

What does this path mean? A student can obtain a solid grasp of the fundamentals of a language, but the student is limited to the information presented during class. For some languages – Latin, for example – this is fine. Other languages, however, often benefit from introduction to cultural and social aspects of the language's country of origin. While this is a valuable aspect of language education, standard American education seldom offers the time or resources to provide perspective on the textbook version of a language.

The problem is that the version of a language taught in schools is a standardized form that the country of origin exports. The "exported" language is that which the country deems most relevant, most official, and most important – not necessarily the colloquial, unregulated form that

is actually used every day by native speakers. Native English speakers know well enough the difference between the way we speak ("Who do I go to?") and the way we are taught is correct ("To whom do I go?"). We also know well enough that those who come to our country speaking English as a foreign language often have "better" grammar than we do. However, these same individuals often have trouble adapting to English colloquialisms, metaphors, and slang. The primary method of learning these intricacies is to immerse oneself in an English-speaking culture. A better approach would be to incorporate some understanding of these realities into the standard language education.

A broad field of study exists around the field of teaching culture and language. This field is not in any way limited to English-speaking countries; it is a worldwide issue. The general consensus is that current educational methods do not allow for the kind of education that is actually necessary for use of a foreign language. According to one researcher, "Our research demonstrated that young people acquire some *information* but very little *knowledge* of the foreign culture through language classes."[1] The key to the *knowledge* to which he refers is the contextual understanding of the influences on the language. Standardized language alone is not sufficient.

What specifically provides this context? What information is missing from language curricula? What, short of traveling abroad for a year, is the best way of understanding the culture of the language one is learning? And how can it be best presented to the potential traveler?

Once an individual gains working academic knowledge of a language, outside of actual immersion, the avenues for learning about cultural issues are limited to the language guides available in book and electronic form. Resources such as the language guides for business

[1] Byram, Morgan, et al. *Teaching-and-Learning Language-and-Culture*. Multilingual Matters, Ltd: Clevedon, UK, 1994, p 3

travelers and tourists that are available in local book stores are helpful, but often default to the conservative side of the spectrum (overly polite and formal speech, so as to avoid nasty conflicts due to misunderstandings) or the slang side (how to pick someone up in a foreign language, common curse words, ways to offend people). Scholarly sources are available from linguistic experts who can define the etymology of every word in a foreign language, but often not of any use to the common speaker. It is possible to watch a movie or read a book in a foreign language, but the experience is limited to the artistic vision and experiences of the author or director. It is simply very difficult to obtain some familiarity with trends in informal vernacular in order to aid sudden immersion into a foreign language.

Consulting two representatives of the existing guides reveals an interesting spectrum. My first reference was the book *Survival French*, published by Langenscheidt, a publisher well-known for its foreign language dictionaries and educational materials. This book presents the prospective traveler with a collection of vocabulary, phrases, and pronunciation deemed most important for "surviving" abroad – greetings, pleasantries, making one's way around an airport, and ordering food. In addition to the vocabulary, periodic notes are offered on "culture" – how to get healthcare, how to properly slice cheese, suggestions of places to visit. The only references to language in the notes come when it is suggested that to be on the safe side, one should always use the formal form of "you," and that at times one can expect to hear the "ne" particle dropped from negation sentences and to hear words strung together when pronounced quickly.[2] In terms of learning when this is appropriate, it says, "You will soon know how to do this."[3] Finally, at the end of the book, there is the following message for the reader:

[2] Lubke, Diethard. *Survival French*. Langenscheidt: New York, 1991, p 21, 25
[3] Lubke, p 21

> "Reader Information: you have already learned about 200 words and phrases. Approximately 800 more commonly used words follow [in the appended dictionary]. Choose from these words as you please to build up your own vocabulary, according to your need. Phonetic transcriptions have not been given here but with the knowledge you have gained from the chapters you will be able to manage."[4]

The key words here are, "you will be able to manage." That is the goal of a language guide of this kind. The information contained within it is elementary for anyone who has previously studied the language and the few attempts at discussion of non-standard French are likely beyond the scope of the language for the person hoping to utilize the guide. It does exactly what it advertises: allows you to survive.

On the other hand, there exist books such as *Merde! The REAL French You Were Never Taught in School*. The preface reads,

> Have you ever thought you had a reasonable command of the language, then seen a French film or gone to France only to find that you could barely understand a word? . . . Here, then, is not an exhaustive or scholarly dictionary of *argot* [slang] . . . but a guide to survival in understanding everyday French as it is *really* spoken."[5]

This appears to have the same goals as my project – to supplement what one has learned in a standardized format, realizing that such a format does not always reflect reality. However, continuing reading reveals a goal that differs significantly from mine.

For example, there are no fewer than thirty pages devoted entirely to sex, drugs, bodily functions, and descriptive terms for all related activities therein. It presents all information in a vocabulary/short phrase format with immediate English translations. While each word or phrase is rated for "strength" – essentially, how much you will offend someone by using it – the book seems to encourage use of these colloquial terms in an attempt to "fit in." It assumes a very high

[4] Lubke, p 88
[5] Edis, Genevieve. *Merde! The Real French You Were Never Taught At School*. Macmillan Publishing Company: New York, 1984, p 1

level of understanding of the social implications of non-standard French and the ability to appropriately read social situations with cultural perspective. In particular, one interesting bit is a short side section under the heading, "A few tips for constructing authentic-sounding sentences." Among the suggestions are "Omit the 'ne' from the negative 'ne … pas.'" And "clip the end vowel off pronouns."[6] While my research suggests that these are all valid forms of slang, my research also suggests that this is much more appropriate in informal situations and more common especially among the younger generations. It would be inappropriate for an unprepared traveler to attempt these in formal situations, with those older than themselves, or in any situation where they are not absolutely sure of the nature of the social dynamics. This could be a dangerous thing. Indeed, this particular resource lends itself extremely well to the well-educated and well-experienced Francophone, but not to a more intermediate individual with only the formal education.

These two examples sit on opposite ends of the spectrum of existing, readily-available language guides. Both are excellent references for vocabulary and phrases and, with some study, can build confidence in speaking a second language. What neither offers is a high-level, general understanding of how to survive as a non-native speaker of French. Neither focuses on indicating the appropriateness of language usage in different situations, or offers reasons as to why the French one learned differs from the French used every day. This is a significant void in language education, and one that I felt needed to be filled.

Justification

[6] Edis, p 13

In the context of the integration of language and culture awareness, I sought to discover what information would assist someone such as me, a potential traveler to France with an academic background in French, if I were to travel abroad and attempt to function in an entirely French-speaking society. Through my research I wanted to condense the relevant historical, cultural, and linguistic information into a format easily digestible by a potential traveler. I chose to focus on French, based on my high school experience with it, a parallel study of Spanish that resulted in some culture-shock during a semester in Mexico, and also based on the intriguing consequences of heavy government involvement in setting policy for the French language. I hoped that my deliverable would be readable, interesting, and above all, useful.

I followed two separate threads throughout the course of the project. One was to look specifically at the historical and cultural material regarding the French language and the scholarly material written concerning deviations of vernacular French from standard French. For this part, I also conducted e-mail-based interviews with several Olin community members who had spent time abroad in French-speaking countries. For the second, I looked at examples of the other available guides to the French language that are available to understand precisely where mine fit in.

For the first thread, I obtained various journal articles concerning the historical and social evolution of French, as well as primary sources (sometimes translated, sometimes not) that were available online. The first collection of journal articles that I read offered not only factual information, but some scholarly interpretation of the significance of historical events – the French Revolution, for example, and the Revolutionary government's use of French as a way to unify the country under a patriotic spirit. Another collection of articles focused more on the development of the linguistic components of French over time, thanks to influences from other

languages, discovery of the New World, technology transfer, and so forth. With these sources I was looking for an overarching discussion of how the language arrived to its current state, how past social influences have allowed the non-standard language to deviate from the standard form, and how such influences might have influenced the current state of the language. In addition, I was able to find a number of specific examples and areas where textbook French is not sufficient for understanding informal French.

The email interviews actually provided fewer specific examples than the literature-based research I conducted, but they did offer more situational information; e.g., where the subject had found herself embarrassed after inappropriately using a slang term in polite company, or another, who used entirely correct grammar which, colloquially, had unintended connotations.

The second thread gave me the opportunity to survey the field of language guides. The *Merde!* book focused on slang and vulgarities and the Langenscheidt guide focused on "survival" in French culture. It was also helpful to double up on one of my historical sources which derived a good deal of French etymology in several of its articles. In addition, I consulted a scholarly publication entitled *Teaching-and-Learning Language-and-Culture*, targeted toward foreign language instructors, which offered insight on the theory of teaching language and culture in an integrated fashion.

My project undoubtedly took a much different approach than most language studies. A major issue is that I was not studying the language while doing this research; in addition, I had no observation with which to back up my claims, as it was obviously impossible to travel to France for this sort of research during the scope of this project. In that respect it was impossible for me to generate any "new" content and my project ended up being just a consolidation of

existing information and others' observations. That said, the resulting deliverable does fill part of the void I felt existed in language education.

I targeted a different audience; I offered a different perspective. I operated under the assumption that it is more helpful to know that the likelihood of certain kinds of slang is higher for younger individuals, not that it is more helpful to know the slang itself. I wanted people to know to expect certain aspects of the language to use imported English words, not the "official" French translations that may be taught in school; equivalently, I wanted to ensure that they have an idea of situations where English words will not be recognized. In what *Teaching-and-Learning Language-and-Culture* refers to as "cultural empathy", I want people to understand the abstracted meanings of the social situations into which they are placed and expected to function.[7] I did not want my deliverable to be a traveler's dictionary; I saw it more as a traveler's preparation.

The bulk of the paper consists of historical and cultural context. The historical section sets up the role of the government in control of French. My goal was to help people understand that, even if the Académie Française no longer plays an active, influential role in everyday life, at one point it had significant political and academic power. This power shaped the language and set precedents for the way new vocabulary and new paradigms are integrated. I also thought it important to know what role the French language played in international politics as France went through periods of revolution, imperialism, and colonization. These events shaped the language as a patriotic symbol of cultural unity in France. This mentality contributes to the many stereotypes Anglophones maintain about native French speakers and their pride in their language.

[7] Byram et al, p 27

Cultural influences come into play in discussions of Romanticism, where the period's artists had unprecedented influence over linguistic development in France, and the problems associated with regional dialects and cultural heritage, gender equality, and other modern issues. The driving point in these sections is the linguistic liberalism of society compared to the government policymakers; even as the Académie and other institutions attempt to maintain strict control, society adapts the language to fit its everyday needs, and these changes are seldom reflected in the standardized documentation of the language.

Finally, through my research and some discussions with near-fluent, non-native French speakers, I presented some specific examples of vocabulary and grammar in non-standard French. I did not even attempt to provide any sort of comprehensive list, but rather to introduce trends found in everyday speech. Some of these associate themselves with specific situations based on age or formality; others are colloquialisms that have become such a part of everyday French that even Microsoft French language spell-check recognizes them as legitimate French. In addition to these linguistic examples, using the personal interviews as a reference, I described a few social situations in which awareness of appropriateness, open-mindedness to non-standard French, and "cultural empathy" is particularly important.

I ultimately produced a deliverable that will never help anyone *learn* French, but I believe it helps to *understand* French. I would compare it to the difference between "information" and "knowledge" described by Byram et al. It is not a replacement for normal education but rather a supplement to the necessary skills gained through the study of grammar and vocabulary. When I went abroad to Mexico, I became very aware of holes in my formal Spanish education. This paper, I believe, works to mend the analogous holes in my French education.

Reflections

Between middle school and high school, I took six years of Spanish classes. I was the best student in my class and earned a five on the Spanish Language AP exam my junior year. My studies developed further when, while working in the kitchen of a Japanese restaurant, my recently immigrated coworkers spoke exclusively Spanish and I had the opportunity to work on my communication skills. Therefore, when I decided to spend a semester abroad in Puebla, Mexico, I was feeling very confident as to my ability to survive in the real Spanish-speaking world.

However, I made an interesting discovery early on. While my high school teachers had been very careful to teach us good generic Latin-American Spanish – we got yelled at frequently for "Spanglish," for example – it turns out some of what we had been told was incorrect Spanglish is *actually legitimate Spanish*. In Mexico, one does not drive a *coche*. One drives a *carro.* Rather than telling time in a unique way – where 2:45 would be "Three o'clock minus a quarter hour" – you actually tell time the way we do in America: "two forty-five." And, contrary to what my teachers had always told me, *estupido* is in fact a Spanish word, and it's a particularly vulgar one, too.

While these discoveries did not inhibit my functioning abroad, they did cause some embarrassment. My Mexican roommates and friends understood what I was saying but they commented frequently on the syntax I used that sounded outdated or too formal. It had nothing to do with my grammar or accuracy in vocabulary. It was all about the context.

Once I realized the position my standardized education had put me in, I began to wonder about the other languages I had studied. The Japanese I know I learned from watching anime

(Japanese cartoons) and translating manga (Japanese comic books) with the help of a dictionary, so I learned how to use different levels of formality in different situations – and noticed whenever I read Japanese language "survival guides", they always defaulted to formalized grammar, which in my (admittedly limited) experience did not always seem appropriate. When I took three years of French in high school, my teacher took the time to explain to us the concept of the *Académie Française* and to periodically interject comments beginning with, "But in France, they ACTUALLY say it like…" The key to all these issues was the understanding of how the language came to evolve over time; many modern conventions stem from past social issues with class, race, and politics. An awareness of these has been invaluable to my linguistic education.

When it came time for me to do my AHS Capstone, I thought it would be the perfect opportunity to investigate this phenomenon in French. French is similar enough to Spanish that it was possible to draw some linguistic parallels between the two. I had taken many courses dealing with historical context for technology, literature, and so on. Why not investigate the historical context for a language?

In the initial proposal stage for this project, I thought it would be particularly helpful to pursue a concurrent study of French as a language. Though I had three years of it in high school, I had left it relatively untouched since and my vocabulary and grammar were rusty. I imagined that as I pursued my contextual research, I could analyze the standardized French I was learning with a more informed eye. However, that goal was pared down through more and more iterations of my proposal, and ultimately I did not follow that path.

In retrospect, however, I wish I had. While there was a wealth of historical information and documentation regarding the development of the French language, it was much harder to

encounter specific examples that would be useful to someone studying French. The historical sources would typically have one example, if any, and the scholarly linguistic articles would reference specific grammatical phenomena in linguistic jargon, but I wanted something in between. Perhaps I was looking for an experience such as the one I had while studying Japanese: watching French movies, reading French books, obtain some reference for the actual daily usage of the language, and in that process absorb some of the actual usage and compare it to the textbook variety

However, in terms of the pursuit of the goal I ultimately did propose – that of the historical and social context – I was pleased with the progress I made. There was a wealth of information and primary sources abounded. Since I was particularly interested in government involvement, the documentation available from the government was very helpful. The only thing I think I would do differently would be to approach it from a purely factual, purely historical standpoint early on, rather than beginning with historical papers that attempted to interpret the context themselves. The way I did do it, I entered some of the purer historical research later on in the process with pre-conceived biases about the meaning and importance of historical events. While I do not believe this adversely affected my paper too much, I think that the organization of my information and subsequent analysis would have been more straightforward using this method.

This lack of balance between the linguistic research and the historical research caused a proportional imbalance in my deliverable. Initially, I imagined the deliverable might be a document with few citations and many, many specific examples of non-standard French that would be immediately useful to a traveler. But the shift in focus from the linguistic studies to the contextual studies meant that I was unable to build up as large a language section as I might have

liked. While I still believe what I wrote would be useful and of interest to the same audience, I also believe that its usefulness has abstracted itself to a much more general level. As I state in my deliverable, the most important thing to have in a linguistic situation is *awareness* of what might be different than expected, and my deliverable does offer that. But it is not precisely what I envisioned producing back in January.

I suppose the issue comes down to the difference between observation and research. My deliverable is the product of research. I found and read sources, I consolidated the information, and I presented it in a condensed form. In not following the path of immersing myself in the language (however shallow that immersion might have been), I was unable to observe the phenomena about which I was reading. As a result, I was unable to offer the informed perspective of a person who has actually experienced what they are presenting. Had I more time to spend on this project, this is what I would pursue. However, I am ultimately pleased with my deliverable, as I found the project very fulfilling and enjoyable; it did for me what I wanted it to do. Perhaps in the future, given any travel opportunities, I may expand upon its content.

Bibliography

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