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A Commentary on Linares and Blocker

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I had always assumed that learning French as a foreign language meant learning how the French talk, write, and think, and that the way the French think was in large part the way they had been taught to think in the French educational system. After all, when I came to the US as a French citizen at age 26, I had to learn all over again how to think, speak, and write in the American way. My French education, like Déborah's, had gotten me a job at UC Berkeley, but, like Emily, I had to learn how to speak respectable academic English and write publishable papers in English to be accepted by American academics. So when Emily told me that, in her French department, students were expected to write essays in French but according to the American norms of the genre, I was thoroughly surprised. And I enthusiastically applauded her research project.

It was, however, disingenuous of me to be surprised. In the fifties at the Sorbonne, as I was studying German language and literature, I was expected to write *dissertations* on German literature according to French, not German, rhetorical norms. And now at UC Berkeley, my German department was not any more hospitable to my French literacy practices than was the French department. Many of my German colleagues felt that my attempts at *explications de texte* of German poems and my efforts to train my students to write tripartite *Aufsätze* (essays), *à la française*, in German was not what should be expected from American students learning German. German academics, they argued, were interested in ideas, not in what they derogatorily called textual *Klempnerarbeit* (plumbing work), which is why, they added, American Germanists wrote mostly on German literature in English, as they were then more at ease to express “big ideas.” And yet this distinction between ideas and linguistic structure, between *le fond* and *la forme*, always made me uncomfortable.

This paradox has occupied me my whole professional life. How can I make American students see that the literacy norms they take for granted in English are not only *not* shared by speakers of other languages, but are vigorously resisted? How can I make them understand that it is those very literacy practices that form the epistemic norms of what we call “culture,” and that the distaste or outright rejection of other norms has to do with the struggle over who has the symbolic power to construct and transmit knowledge? In the US, I started reflecting on my French training. I felt grateful for its rigor and textual precision but resented its rigidity and formalism. I realized how much of it was steeped in a philological tradition that had spawned a structuralist mindset I had now outgrown. I discovered the British tradition of discourse analysis (Widdowson, 1984) and discourse stylistics (Fowler, 1986; Short 1996; Simpson, 1993) that fruitfully replaced the tiresome *analyses grammaticales* and dry *explications de*

texte of my youth. They allowed me to combine my love of literature and, together with research in conversation analysis, my love of daily conversation. Seeing language as discourse rather than as structure opened up for me a post-structuralist world that I grew into with a passion.

Emily's paper and Déborah's reflections have confirmed for me the importance of what Michel Agier (2016) has called "epistemic decentring," a reflexive posture towards the ways in which we acquire, use, and display knowledge; an awareness that these ways of knowing are not natural nor immutable, but are historically constructed and differently valid in different cultural contexts; and that there is much to gain from learning not only how to speak differently but how to think differently. By defamiliarizing the taken-for-granted logic of writing and attending to what Déborah calls in her response "the foreignness within," foreign language pedagogy can reveal the students to themselves in new and exciting ways.

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