Editorial: Egocentricity and Learning to Hear a Foreign Language

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Christian theology, Stephen Webb argues, teaches that "freedom begins in the ear before it reaches the mouth."[1] Hearing (not here to be equated with a certain physical means of receiving auditory stimuli) has a basic place in the process of spiritual growth - Webb goes as far as to claim that "all of biblical religion can be summarized in the Shema of Deuteronomy which begins, 'Hear, O Israel.'"[2] Ironically, Webb suggests, at a time in history when more words are broadcast into our immediate environment than ever before, the visual nature of our culture together with the sheer quantity of aural information (much of it trivial) mean that listening as a discipline has ebbed; we interact as shallow consumers of communication, commonly with little deep attentiveness. In a culture used to thinking of agency as speaking, "we need to hear an external sound to save us from the temptation of turning our life into a monologue."[3] Such hearing is not simply a question of aural proficiency; it involves the more personal, ethical and spiritual dimensions of turning oneself receptively towards another ("be careful how you hear," admonished Jesus in Luke 18:18). Hearing in this sense has to do with the spirit of our attentiveness and the ways in which we receive and respond to God and neighbor, to the persons we hear and to the truth embedded in their speech.

It is perhaps telling that we talk so readily of learning to speak a foreign language and so rarely of learning to hear a foreign language. The emphasis on speaking not only reflects the central difficulty of learning to make one's speech apparatus produce new sounds and meanings fluently and coherently and flows from the communicative movement's effort to escape the passivity and impracticality of some traditional language learning, but also meshes with some basic cultural emphases in modern Western society: the autonomy and uniqueness of the individual self, a view of language as individual self-expression, the close association between the

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quest for voice and the quest for personal power, and a social environment that foregrounds persuasion and ties many kinds of success to getting one's message across. Little wonder that we intuitively prioritize speaking over hearing when we talk about what it is to learn a foreign language.

Consider some of the consequences, however, of an instinctive tendency to think of language learning in terms of the empowerment of our own voice and to think less readily of what we need to hear and of that to which we have been deaf. In one Christian school that I visited recently, the Spanish department had articulated its vision as being "to break down barriers of language and culture in order to communicate God's love to people around you." This seems admirable, as far as it goes. I was shown copies of a questionnaire on which secondary students were asked whether their Spanish classes had in fact prepared them to realize this vision. The responses all focused on speaking, many on telling. There were many variants on the comment that learning Spanish made it possible to tell more people about Jesus (sometimes with the apparent assumption that God's love would not spread beyond the English-speaking world if other languages were not studied). One student disingenuously crystallized what was bothering me as I read through the responses, writing: "because I can speak their language, now they can understand me better." Another wrote about attempts to converse during a mission trip that "they eventually got my main points." A third wrote that being able to speak another people's language makes them "respect you more." With one or two notable exceptions, these students' responses reflected little concern for learning *from* Spanish speakers, little awareness of what Spanish speakers might have to teach *them* about the love of God, and little attentiveness to Spanish speakers as more than needy recipients of their meanings.

This rightly concerned the Spanish teachers in the school, and we worked together to design strategies for reframing the students' experience of learning Spanish as a part of Christian education. The pattern of the students' responses shows a breakdown in the emphasis in Christian spirituality noted by Webb – the often noted relationship between sin and self-absorption, the connection between salvation and vulnerability to a voice from outside oneself, and the kind of attentiveness to others enjoined by the central commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). Christian faith combined with the assumption of the self as an autonomous speaker easily loses its ear for the other.

Of course the kind of hearing that Webb has primarily in mind is

hearing the voice of God in preaching and in Scripture, but the question of basic posture leaks past those boundaries. Gerald Bruns, describing Martin Luther's hermeneutics as presupposing "a relationship to the Scriptures that is not a grammarian's relationship to a textual object but that of a listener to a voice,"[4] explores the broader relationship to language that this hermeneutic suggests. He comments:

> Of course, we imagine that in learning a language, for example, we come to master it, to appropriate it and make it our own. This instrumental view is, so to speak, our natural (or at all events modern) attitude toward language. But an experience with language turns this attitude upside down. Appropriation is no longer an act that we perform, but an event in which we are taken up and which brings us out into the open, exposes us to what we cannot control, to words and things exceeding the grasp of our concepts…An experience with language turns us into something other than speaking subjects; it takes us out of the propositional attitude in which we assert our mastery over words and things and resituates us in an attitude of listening.[5]

Language, in other words, resists our efforts to make it a mere object of our instrumental designs. Language envelops and sustains our selfhood, and learning new languages to any degree of depth invites changes that touch upon our selfhood, not merely new competencies for achieving pre-established aims.

Mikhail Bakhtin likewise (if in a different theoretical context) points to the primacy of hearing in our experience of language:

> … no speaker is an autonomous originator, for any speaker is himself [sic] a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances—his own and others'—with which his given utterance enters into one kind of relation or another (builds on them, polemicizes with them, or simply presumes that they are already known to the listener). Any utterance is

> a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances.[6]

We only speak, Bakhtin points out, using words (and phrases and entire genres) that have already passed through the mouths of others, that have already been loaded with denotative and connotative meaning, that were not our inventions yet make it possible for us to speak at all. Our development as speaking selves has its roots in the speech of others and is always deeply indebted from the very beginning ("What do you have that you did not receive?" asks Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:7).

When we approach the learning of a second language, we do so having already gained some linguistic competency and power. The question of hearing before speaking has become an ethical one, a question of the quality of attentiveness that we accord to speakers of other languages before we visit our own speech upon them. Bakhtin suggests elsewhere that this quality of attentiveness, together with the love that can sustain it, is a key element in the ability to understand human realities:

> The valued manifoldness of Being as human ... can present itself only to loving contemplation ... Lovelessness, indifference, will never be able to generate sufficient attention to slow down and *linger intently* over an object, to hold and sculpt every detail and particular in it, however minute ... An indifferent or hostile reaction ... always ... impoverishes and decomposes its object.[7]

If Bakhtin is correct then if a learner is to encounter the "valued manifoldness" present in the experiences of members of another culture and language community, the development not merely of proficiency, but also of loving attentiveness, will be a prerequisite.

In the language classroom we deal with both language samples (fragments of possible speech broken down for analysis and practice) and with language as utterance (extracts of varying length of the language of actual others, ranging from recordings of spontaneous oral utterances to highly wrought texts of various kinds). It is therefore necessary to attend not only to the ways in which an experience of a new language can reshape our sense of possibility, but also to the manner in which we will attend to what fellow humans (within and beyond the classroom) have to say, what we will draw from it, what kind of *hearers* we will be. The rhetoric that has surrounded much contemporary language education, with its emphasis on

learning languages for increased personal profit, pleasure and power, tends, I suggest, to relegate this question to secondary importance. This makes it necessary to be intentional about considering what changes would result in our pedagogy, our course content, our ideas of successful outcomes, and the ways in which we present and explain these to students if we placed central value on learning to *hear* members of the target culture, rather than on making sure they can hear what we have to say.

One of the goals that I have articulated to myself for my second-year German sequence is that every student by the end of the year would have heard a German-speaker (whether in person or through a text) say something to them that causes them to change their life. This has in part guided my choice of texts and materials for the course. I have turned to material such as the oral history of an elderly German housewife, poems such as Bonhoeffer's "Who am I?" or Enzensberger's "Middle Class Blues", or songs such as "Wenn du schlaefst" by the Söhne Mannheims (and its accompanying video, a poignant visual plea to attend to the suffering of children worldwide). Such texts allow me to model my own efforts to hear the call of truth as embodied in a German voice, and to listen to student responses. I do not expect that any given choice of text will yield automatic impact (in surveys of students asking which texts have been the most and the least helpful, I have consistently found that most of the texts appear in both categories – one person's most significant learning experience of the semester was another's disposable moment; I have started sharing this fact with students). But when I get students asking me if a Bonhoeffer poem is available in English, because they think their friends need to read it, or telling me that they have come to admire the elderly Adaline Kelbert from Hamburg and hope that they are like her when they are old, it seems as if we are on the right track.

One strand in the texts chosen has been a deliberate inclusion of suffering of various kinds – something largely absent from many textbooks. Returning to Webb's exploration of voice and hearing, we find him discussing the nature of God's listening:

> God's hearing is not only perfect but also perfectly moral. When God tells the Hebrews not to abuse widows and orphans, God declares, "If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry" (Exod. 22:23)…The Bible repeatedly depicts God as hearing the cries of those who are victims of injustice (Gen 18:20-21;

> Exod. 3:7; 15:24-25; 22:7; Num. 20:16; Judg. 10:12; Ps. 12:5; Isa 19:20; and on and on). What is remarkable is not just that the biblical writers think of God as having perfect hearing but that God seems to be more sensitive to the loud and high-pitched sounds of suffering than to other tones of the human voice.[8]

If this is how God hears, and we are called to be imitators of God, then this is how we need to learn to hear. This awareness, too, can inform what goes on in language education. It not only helps to frame some of the textual choices mentioned already, but can point us toward outcomes beyond the classroom that can be intentionally pursued. I have previously described in these pages an incident in which one of my German students called me from Germany to relate how he had been able to be of comfort to a newly unemployed German whom he encountered on a bus simply by listening to him with a sympathetic ear for the duration of the bus journey.[9] He ascribed his motivation for choosing to lend an ear to brief discussion of the Shema, "Hear, O Israel," in German class a year earlier. I submit that this is a kind of learning success not measured on proficiency scales, one that, to be sure, depended on the proficient ability to process German (nothing that I have said negates that need), but also went beyond it to a quality of personal attentiveness whose realization seemed to bear some relationship to conscious pursuit of it during our time together in class.

The autonomous self tends to prefer the stance of masterful speaker to that of vulnerable hearer. The path to spiritual growth and the need to approach our neighbor with loving attentiveness are bound up with hearing. Something that runs counter to our basic egocentricity is unlikely to take deep root if we do not seek it intentionally. I suggest that these are matters deserving our sustained attention

Introduction to Volume 8

The papers in this eighth volume of the Journal of Christianity and Foreign Languages cover, as ever, a range of concerns and interests, although this year's submissions showed definite numerical bias toward French. Terry Osborn's plenary address from the 2006 NACFLA conference at Baylor University opens the volume. In it, he reprises the argument

of his 2006 book on *Teaching World Languages for Social Justice*. The dominance of marketplace ideologies in our thinking about the role and justification of world language education has, he argues, made it all but impossible to construct a robust educational rationale for language learning. Such a rationale would, he suggests, need to be based in our responsibility to our fellow humans rather than in utilitarian claims. The two papers that follow share a focus on Corneille's play Polyeucte. With its focus on theological questions, this play has drawn more attention in the pages of this journal (with Hadley Wood's 2001 paper preceding these latest discussions) than any other single author or work. Leonard Marsh examines how the portrayal of space in the play relates to the treatment of Jansenist and Molinist conceptions of grace. Matthew Motyka follows this with a consideration of the relationship between Polyeucte's Christian conversion and classical modes of heroism, and between the political and religious dimensions of the play. Kelsey Haskett continues the focus on French literature in her paper on George Sand, in which she describes how spiritual and feminist themes and motifs interweave in the novel *Indiana*.

The forum contains three short pieces, each addressing an important issue. Mary Buteyn, using examples from student visits to Germany, considers how students' Christian identity should be expressed during visits to the target culture, and the complexities involved in such expression. James Wilkins relates how he redesigned the assessment practices in an intermediate French course in order to achieve a more just evaluation of student proficiency in French. Finally, Lindy Scott presents a denominational resolution on the question of immigration, thereby providing an example of how theology is being brought to bear upon a question of continuing relevance to language educators. The journal concludes with a review of Chris Anderson's account of his experiences as a Christian teacher of literature at a public university.

Contributors to the journal continue to open up fresh aspects of the complex relationship between Christianity and the teaching of world languages and literatures. Their work will find its completion in the attentiveness and response of you, its readers.

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NOTES

[1] Stephen H. Webb, *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound,* Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004, p. 25.

[2] Webb, p. 49.

[3] Webb, p. 41.

[4] Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, p. 147.

[5] Bruns, p. 157.

[6] Bakhtin, Mikhail M., *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (V. W. McGee, Trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986, p. 69.

[7] Bakhtin, Mikhail M., *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (V. Liapunov, Trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993, p. 64.

[8] Webb, pp. 49-50.

[9] See Smith, David I., 'Coral Gardens and Classroom Ecology,' *Journal of Christianity and Foreign Languages* 6, 2006, pp. 87-90.

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