

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF LANGUAGE TEACHING
ESL in Los Angeles¹

0. INTRODUCTION. Language teaching takes on new dimensions in Los Angeles, as an integral part of a great autogenic social experiment. A traditional component of a second language curriculum is a course on the political history and institutions of the country as well as the monuments in literature, music and art. Those institutions and monuments constitute the 'cultural horizons' reflected in the language. We might call that a bias. The language community prejudices reality, offers a body of interpretations about what constitutes reality. The learner is taught to trade one set of biases (in the form of convictions and beliefs) for another, and in doing so has learned, in addition to another system of expression, that the original way of seeing the world is first of all conditioned by social circumstance and second of all just one of at least two consistent sets of interpretation. Yet, in trading those pre-judgments, the learner has not necessarily advanced any closer to the truth of the world outside him-/herself (let's say beyond categorization). That stage comes when the realization sinks in with full force that all we can know of the objective world outside ourselves is our perception of it, subject to interpretation, which in turn is conditioned by social environment. It is this second and more important stage in promoting inter-cultural awareness as a means to self-awareness that the social setting of Los Angeles makes possible as an attainable goal in a language learning situation. In what follows I pursue three themes: why the goal of relativizing our notion of objectivity is a worthy one, why Los Angeles is a social environment conducive to the achievement of such a goal and how it can be implemented in the language-learning classroom.

1.0. RELATIVIZATION. Stephan Dedalus, the young hero of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, says after discovering his vocation that nets of tradition are flung to hold back the soul from flight and that he has made it his task to fly by those nets. A critic once commented that Joyce had exiled himself from his country only to spend his life writing about it. I suspect that by abstracting away from Irish nationalist and Jesuit traditions, Joyce was able to view them for what they are, a colorful pigmentation in the flow of life. Do we, as Dedalus/Joyce, need to fling off our nets? We do, even should we later choose to dedicate our lives to their description, or to don again their costumes as William Pather, the voice of art for art's sake at the turn of the century, later donned Catholicism to revel in the sensual pageantry. The reason is simple and lies in our

¹ This paper is dedicated to my Los Angeles City College English 86 class, Spring 1989.

search for truth, to truly understand the world we inhabit, and those who inhabit it, including ourselves.

In *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl asks the fundamental question, how we can know there really is an objective world outside of us and not fall into solipsism. The starting point for Husserl is the philosopher's stone, suspending judgment, in the form of a set of convictions and beliefs, and becoming, then, non-judgmental. Husserl takes us through a series of meditations where he puts us in the position with him of not knowing whether there is an external reality and trying to reconstruct how we arrive at the knowledge that there is. A key step comes when we register the fact that there are others, non-selves, who have their own experiences of the world, and of us, and convince ourselves that these others are themselves original, impenetrable souls and not just alter egos. As all we know of the world is our perception of it, the world becomes for us "an idea that uniformly and unceasingly unites experience."² With the others whose separate identities we have established, we form a transcendental intersubjectivity with which we mutually reconstruct the objective world, equally external to all of us. In making this first step, we have to accept that there are others, whose thoughts and behavior differ from our own. If they did not, they would merely be an extension of ourselves and lose their status as impenetrable souls, forcing us back into our initial position of solipsism. Through empathy we comprehend the concept of non-self and a world external to our consciousness. Husserl maintains that we accomplish this by modulating our own thoughts and behavior and learning to posit "possible" human behavior next to "actual" behavior. Our first concrete objective world, then, exists for us as a cultural community. It is this community "that makes the existence of a transcendental and object-filled world possible."³ Now, in the same way that empathy enabled an understanding of other non-selves, it also makes possible the registering and understanding of separate communities:

I and my culture are primordial in relation to each foreign culture, accessible to me and cultural cohorts through an empathy with the foreign cultural community (par. 58)⁴

² 'eine unendliche, auf Unendlichkeiten einstimmig zu vereinender Erfahrungen bezogene Idee' (par. 28)

³ 'eine wirkliche Gemeinschaft, and eben die, die das Sein der Welt, einer Menschen- and Sachenwelt, transzendental moeglich macht.' (par. 56)

⁴ 'Hier sind Ich and meine Kultur das Primordiale gegenüber jeder "fremden" Kultur. Diese ist mir and meinen Kulturgenossen nur zugänglich in einer Art Fremderfahrung, einer Art Einfühlung in die

We need, therefore , to go through the same procedure as before when we arrived at a transcendental intersubjectivity: by empathizing with individuals from another culture, we recognize culture per se as a "mental predicate," a way of seeing the world or systematizing experience. And just as the truth of an objective world required the ability to step beyond ourselves, to suspend initial pre-judgments and convictions, this second step requires stepping outside our cultural horizons and multiplying our inventory of possible interpretations of the world.

That is not to abandon that 'primordial community' as Joyce did not abandon his, at least in terms of subject matter. Rather cross-cultural empathy enables one to re-immense oneself in the original community with enhanced understanding, as we re-immersed ourselves in our primordial self after establishing the existence of others. Germans are fond of saying that Americans "have no culture." This gentle rebuke becomes an indication of a source of American strength when viewed in the light of the above. The United States is a nation that has little to do with the Latin root 'natio,' birth. That is not to say that there is not a system of values that constitutes the nation or that tradition is lacking. But it is not the tradition of 'ein Volk' united by uniform heritage and uniform race that migrated collectively to an area, claiming it as a nation state. People of differing race and with differing heritage arrived, uniting with other immigrants and inhabitants by virtue of social and political principle.

2.0. MULTI-ETHNIC LOS ANGELES. California has, from its inception, been marked by a multiplicity of races preserving their own systems of cultural values, whether the original Indian inhabitants, the Hispanic, Japanese, Chinese., Portuguese, Armenians, etc. In the Southwest, the Hopi preserve their value system through community and ceremony on original Hopi land settled continuously since 1100. To get there, one goes through the extensive Navajo reservation, who migrated later to the area and have their own language. On the East Coast, maybe, to a certain extent, America really once was a melting pot, but in the West, in Los Angeles, it has been an amalgamation, where a multiplicity of language, dress, custom, of cultural horizons, exist side by side. To have melted in one would have produced the blandness of the uniform shopping malls in small Midwestern towns. But the coexistence entails the constant presence of 'others,' of non-selves like those whose presence was necessary to establish our first transcendental inter-

fremde Kulturmenschheit and ihre Kultur. . .'

subjectivity. This time, we can go a step further and establish the mutability of our cultural horizons as well.

However marked Los Angeles has always been by racial diversity, that diversity has become more pronounced in the last two decades. Some figures offered by Crawford: nearly 25% of all immigrants to the United States in 1981 came to California. The number of non-Hispanic whites in the makeup of the entire state population between 1970 and 1985 decreased from 78 to 63%, and the number of blacks increased by only 1% from 6 to 7%, while the Hispanic and Asian populations increased from 12 to 21% and from 3 to 8%, respectively (154). In the school district of LA Unified there are pupils from 82 language backgrounds and besides English, school classes are taught in Armenian, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Spanish, Korean and Filipino (159).

We are often exposed to the downside of this in Los Angeles: racial hatred, gangs protecting their turf against 'others,' drug use and despair stemming from discrimination at all levels. The positive aspect of the same phenomenon is the budding awareness of a new vantage point where we can look upon the myriad of cultural groups surrounding us as a field of wild flowers, made more splendid by their very diversity. And from that vantage point we have once again enhanced our understanding of what constitutes 'true' reality.

3.0. ESL in LA. In the language classroom, all this allows us to give new meaning to the concept of cultural sensitivity. It seems less important in Los Angeles to teach American studies, as I did in West Germany, than to teach Cultural Awareness. As a result, instruction becomes more than a skills-development course--as a genuine communicative experience between cultures it becomes part of the social experiment itself. That at least was my impression of a recent course I taught at the Los Angeles City College to students from El Salvador, Armenia, Nicaragua, The People's Republic of China, Poland, Korea, Ethiopia, Taiwan, Argentina, Mexico, Cambodia, Thailand and Ecuador.

The textbook we used, *Experiences*, contains a selection of short literary texts, annotated but not edited, collected by John Dennis, including texts from Isak Dinasen, Steinbeck and Saroyan. Many of the texts get at cross-cultural experience in subtle ways, such as the poem "Snake" by D.H. Lawrence. In the poem, Lawrence is confronted with the voice of his "accursed human education" which prevents him from seeing a snake as a creature of beauty rather than a harbinger of evil he is expected to eradicate. One student in commenting on Lawrence's struggle in the poem wrote:

Lawrence struggles within himself and lets part of his feelings afloat and says: "But must I confess how I like him." And it is at this moment that Lawrence discovers his own values and beliefs. After observing for some time the snake, he can see now its beauty and can show his respect at the same time by waiting for the snake to get the water first. At that moment he is not judging things through the eyes of some other people; he is not carrying somebody else's thoughts anymore; he has discovered his own.

Lawrence's struggle is far from over. At the end of the poem he throws a log at the snake and regrets immediately his failure to listen to his own voice. For the student who wrote the above passage, writing was a discovery process, by means of which she achieved a new understanding not just of the poem, but of herself. Months later, near the end of the course, the same student returned to the expression nonjudgmental to make a significant comment on another work under discussion. The discovery of alternative viewpoints is a discovery of self. And the students have many avenues still to explore: what the snake might represent, especially in terms of cultural norms or cultural conditioning.

Another key component in the course was an excerpt from the Bill Moyer's interviews with Joseph Campbell aired on PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), *The Power of Myth*. In the half-hour segment, Campbell discusses the circle as a symbol of perfection, putting it in the Jungian framework as an archetype of the collective unconscious, an "expression of the human psyche." He goes on to discuss its symbolic representation of the cycle of life in the rituals of and sand painting by the Navajo and Tibetan monks. The point as Campbell states it is that "within the ethnic idea [attributes of an individual culture] is the elementary idea [the universal commonality of all cultural groups]".

The students then write an essay on a legend or rite from their own culture. They stand up to share the final draft with the class so the individual student is identified with the essay. One student chose last semester to write about a Korean holiday Choo-Soog, 'Autumn Evening,' similar to Thanksgiving. In the celebration, food, such as song pyan, a rice cake, is prepared to honor the ancestors. Special dishes are then taken to the houses of neighbors, who, never returning an empty plate, reciprocate in kind. In the question and answer session that followed, the student's classmates became fascinated

with the nature of Confucianism and its impact on the regulation of family affairs in Korea. A genuine interest was fostered in the traditions related, not as something foreign to be distrusted, but as another element in the multi-colored mosaic of the classroom, a microcosm of Los Angeles.

Another unit on the Civil Rights Movement includes a video segment from the PBS documentary *Eyes on the Prize* that reenacts an embarrassing era in American history when racial hatred was expressed quite openly as part of the collective perception that tolerated notions of racial superiority despite the national effort in the Second World War to fight against such views. That notion of reality is documented dramatically by the scenes of nine well-mannered students, screamed at, threatened and attacked by angry mobs of parents and local citizenry outside a high school in Little Rock, Arkansas, until the US Army was parachuted in to provide a daily escort.

The Civil rights unit also includes "A Fly in Buttermilk" by James Baldwin, who relativized his own cultural horizons through a nine-year stay in Europe where the racial hatred that surrounded his youth in New York and New Jersey was absent. In the essay, Baldwin goes to the deep South where he interviews the family of the first black to integrate a particular high school, despite daily taunts and violent attacks. He also interviews the principle struggling to be decent but thrashing about in the cultural precepts that entrap him. In addressing Baldwin's statements that "segregation allowed white people to create in every generation on the Negro they wished to see," an Ethiopian woman eloquently articulated for the class the psychological intersubjectivity that allows races to accept their lot concerning the presence or absence of basic privileges based on the collectively accepted notion that the human condition might vary with the color of the skin.

By this, time in the course we in the class were learning ourselves to "battle past [our] personal and historical limitation" to achieve "undisturbed direct experience," the hero's task in Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a task that is to lead to the rebirth of society.

At the end of the course we rather spontaneously had a songfest. Nelly brought in a French song she translated about the massacre of the Armenians in the early part of this century. The song, Donna, Donna, Donna, originally in Yiddish about the Holocaust was also

shared. The class sang together with me Woody Guthrie's folk song: This land is your land, this land is my land, but including a verse I once heard sung by a folk-singer:

As I was walking, I saw a sign
And on that sign it said no tresspassin';
But on the other side, it didn't say
nothin'-That side was made for you and me!

When we sang the chorus again I couldn't help feeling that here was the rebirth of society in our microcosm, a microcosm of Los Angeles, by shattering the cultural barriers and their transformation into the portal of a new awareness.

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