More Than Words

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The Profile Essay

Research in progress for ENGL 1301: Composition 1

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The following paper represents exemplary research work from English 1301, the first course in the two-semester composition sequence at Collin College. English 1301 introduces the concept of academic research as inquiry by teaching students to ask focused open-ended questions and then using the library and online resources to help them conceptualize and test possible answers. Throughout this process, the focus remains squarely on questions and probable answers rather than on arguments and definitive conclusions.

In the following profile essay, Ki James thinks through his emerging research-based understanding of the use of technology in Translation Studies by considering his professor Dr. Sean Geraghty's experience. By focusing on the interview and other classroom interactions with Dr. Geraghty, Ki tests and productively questions the possible effectiveness of translation technology in navigating the more human and culture-based aspects of interpreting. Investigating this inquiry question in the profile essay not only allows Ki to test new ideas but also to raise productive research questions. Merging this research with the lived experience of Dr. Geraghty thus shapes Ki's continued interest in Translation Studies, potentially providing direction to his own future academic work.

The researched profile essay represents an alternative approach to the traditional research paper often required in composition courses. By locating an interest in a career field and narrowing their research to intersect with and amplify the experiences of a specific worker, students learn valuable inquiry-based research and writing skills while also gaining nuanced knowledge of the careers they aspire to.

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ENGL 1301

Dr. Lisa Roy-Davis

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Dr. Sean Geraghty's office stood as an island of comfort surrounded by a sea of bleak, impersonal hallways. Looking in through the door window, I could see a piece of paper stuck to the side of his bookshelf with the words "Please Knock" written in wide, hasty letters. I knocked as instructed and awkwardly shuffled into the room. He was sorting through some assignments he was grading, and we exchanged some pleasantries. I started to study the office itself: dimly lit, small, and cluttered. The bookshelf sagged with the weight of books, and pictures of his family, surrounded by memorabilia from his travels, guarded each shelf vigilantly. The most useful of his books sat on his desk, their corners flayed and soft, each page sporting creases and bends from frequent use as a warrior wears his scars. Notably, his computer—the only piece of technology aside from his radio—was pushed to the side and away from the middle of his desk.

Dr. Geraghty's background in linguistics and his career path provide a strong model for students who aspire to teach in his field. After having taught in one form or another since he was fourteen, he moved into higher education with initial interests in history and English. He successfully obtained his bachelor's degree in English at Western Washington University before moving to Wisconsin to study African Language

and Literature at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. While he initially solely engaged in Anglophonic African works, his forays into translated Arabic texts demanded that he learn the source tongue. Later, he also spent time working as a teacher in the United Arab Emirates, working to improve his grasp of the language. It was this attention to detail and his desire for more experience that led Professor Geraghty to take longer than most graduate students to earn his doctoral degree.

As I settled into the chair, squashed somewhat uncomfortably in the corner, he initiated the conversation with his ever-soothing voice, "So, why are you interviewing me again?" He had a vaguely skeptical, but not dismissive, look on his face. It isn't surprising that he asked the first question in the interview, since it plays so well into his honest, charitable demeanor. He rarely says anything without giving it much thought, and if he gets pushed into it by a difficult question, he would be quick to carve up his own ideas for the sake of a more honest, if not less robust, answer. In this case, I was interested in researching the field of translation and interpretation and thought that his academic approach could be revealing.

The conversation began with one of the first works I found in my research, The American Translator's Association's website—a fascinating source largely because of its failure to comment on any aspect of the field at all. On the Web page entitled "Translation: Getting it Right," the ATA offers advice on how to properly market one's translation skills when securing a job (Durban). I wanted to know what Professor Geraghty thought of the website's single-minded approach, and so I brought it up. Dr. Geraghty combated this lack of focus on the human elements that the ATA website

demonstrates by introducing the idea of how politics relate to modern language learning. He said, "Learning Arabic at all is a political statement, unfortunately, in our modern world." In other words, escaping the cultural context behind languages, even down to as rudimentary a level as choosing which one to study, is impossible. Even if the cultural context does not factor into what the ATA website does, it's still there. This is an idea he explores not only in the interview, but also the classroom. Dr. Geraghty makes a point to talk about the issues affecting the Middle East, going so far as to show bits of news broadcasts in Arabic, demonstrating his belief that it's far better to tackle these issues head on than to pretend they don't exist.

There is far more to the idea of exploring the contextual or human elements behind language than is originally obvious. For example, Christo Van der Merwe, a linguistics professor from Stellenbosch University in South Africa, published an article about Biblical translations into Afrikaans that attempts to describe "some of the typical examples of the challenges that need to be faced" (2). He uses the phrase "inadequate and misleading translation" (4) when discussing his contemporary's work to refer to an idea he believes—the idea that in order to effectively translate meaning, we need to establish knowledge of the culture that used the relevant words and what thought processes lay behind those decisions, echoing the sentiment behind Professor Geraghty tackling political issues wrapped up in contemporary languages head on. Furthermore, Van der Merwe incorporates the idea of "inadequate and misleading translations" into his exploration of a specific word that gives translators pause, namely, "the Hebrew geographical term safela (שְׁפֵלָה)" (4). He does this by commenting, "It is

apparent that translators of modern English translations have not been very certain how to render this expression that refers exclusively to the low-lying hill country west of the central Judean mountain range" (4). Because Van der Merwe believes that there's a lot more to words than just what they "mean," he feels it necessary to establish what those words refer to within this society that used them.

Dr. Geraghty's work supports this line of reasoning. He told me, "You might be able to say all the right words in the right way, but if you don't know how to act within the other society then you aren't as effective as somebody who does but then isn't as technically correct." If there's more to words than what they literally mean or how they are syntactically used, then it's at least equally important to understand what cultural context the people using these words act within, and how to connect with that culture as much as with their words. While discussing this concept, Dr. Geraghty quickly turned to his bookshelf and skimmed his eyes across it, hesitating for but a moment before plucking the lucky book from its tight home. It was by the Egyptian feminist author Nawal El-Saadawi titled in Arabic, Jannat wa-Iblis. "By itself, those are just two names of characters in the book, but they're a sort of play on words. Jannat refers to heaven, and Iblis refers to Satan," he explained, gesturing up for Jannat and down for Iblis with his dominant left hand. "So when translating the name of the book, you could just write, 'Heaven and the Devil' or even keep it in the untranslated Arabic, but instead we will translate it as, 'The Innocence of the Devil.'" In other words, the orthodox translation of the name of that book seeks to preserve the culturally relevant, context-dependent name rather than maintain the reference to the characters in the book. He explored this

idea—a deeper context behind language—in a different way soon after by giving the example about how in Arabic culture, the bottoms of your feet are especially unseemly, and even showing them is seen as extremely disrespectful. Many people go to the Middle East not knowing that. A translator or interpreter trying to build a reputation with the people of this tradition instantly kills any attempt to be "one of them" by committing this faux pas. An example of this in action that he gave was the infamous incident where, in December 2008, a reporter threw his shoes at President George Bush. Geraghty says, "Here at home, we were all laughing at the guy, saying things like, 'Ahaha! He threw his shoe at him! Ahaha!' However, in Iraq that was an important symbol of their people's disdain for the puppet government." Put in a different way, a huge aspect of effective communication is understanding the culture that said language exists in, whether in the complicated semantic nuances of a book title, or even how to move your body around other people. There is a wider range of communicative skills that translation and interpretation demands than just vocabulary and syntax.

Interestingly, my research points to the fact that not all see the deeper context and complexity behind languages and cultures. In the tech world, for example, companies are competing to make easy-to-use translation software and devices. In a 2017 Forbes review, Geoffrey Morrison writes about one such promising innovation, the Ili, a handheld device that claims to provide instant and accurate translations between a few high use languages. Morrison says, "We're still not quite there for the Star-Trek-style Universal Translator," revealing his assumption that the wall between two languages is mere vocabulary and syntax, a challenging but not impossible task for an

advanced algorithm. He does not recognize that there are more to words than what they literally mean. Additionally, he expresses this failing through his fixation on the speed, ergonomics, and convenience of the Ili as opposed to an assessment of the quality of translation. Morrison reserves but one sentence for the topic, simply commenting, "I also did some testing with my polyglot friend and she judged the Spanish translation to be quite good." Considering the fact that he undervalues the importance of cultural understanding in his assessment of this toy, he's far more interested in how fast and how appealing the Ili is while it's doing its job. Geoffrey Morrison thinks like a tech reviewer, not a linguist.

When I brought up the Ili to Dr. Geraghty, I was surprised by how dismissive he was of the concept. Up until that point, I was still under the impression that software like the Ili would eventually devour translation and interpretation, but his rebuke of the device was striking. He once said during class, confidently sauntering around the room as he always did, "I've always sort of prided myself on not having a smartphone." He was quick to justify this position, pre-empting any incredulous mockery, by explaining all the health problems that accompany heavy phone use (such as the infamous "text neck"); however, what he revealed about his thought processes is far more than just his interest in a healthy spine. When he chooses to privilege more personal and direct forms of conversation, he's continuing to deepen the idea that there's more to language and communication than the way you choose to order your wordy mouth-noises.

Dr. Geraghty told a story that is similarly inconspicuous at first glance, but very revealing to his understanding of human communication. He was at a panel for

advertising different classes offered at Collin College when "a woman approached me with the abaya and everything," he said as he waved his hand in front of his face, demonstrating how her clothes concealed her. "She was expressing interest in our Arabic program because she was thinking about putting her sons in it, and I was really excited." Before continuing, Geraghty quickly backtracked to explain how a man making any physical contact with a woman in very conservative Muslim culture is strictly taboo, even when it's a gesture as small as a handshake. "And so I, without thinking, and I knew not to do this..." he said, stumbling through his sentences, his whole body pressed down by the weight of the memory. "I stuck out my hand, without thinking, to introduce myself. And then she pulled her arms up," he explained, demonstrating her actions with his own body, "and walked away." In other words, it was necessary to understand the societal context in which the woman was operating and not just the words with which she expressed her interest in order to complete a fruitful interaction.

If this is true, then the ideas that Van der Merwe and Dr. Geraghty posit apply to far more than just the linguistic discipline. As our world shrinks and becomes increasingly interconnected, being aware of the different frames of reference within which people operate is imperative to building meaningful relationships with those people. Futurist techies like Morrison or single-minded business interests like the ATA can only take us halfway there. This mindset that Van der Merwe begins to explore is acted out by Professor Geraghty on a daily basis. When he encourages students to visit him in his office hours, and continue to visit him after they've graduated, he demonstrates the idea that his students are not just sponges for information. When he

responds to every email in a detailed, respectful manner, he exhibits the idea that everyone has valuable and interesting ideas, even if he may think they're totally wrong. When he assigns obscure works of literature in his Humanities course, he displays his belief that all human expression is valuable. Professor Geraghty's incredible, effective, and memorable classes show us the power of focusing on the humanity behind not just language, but behind actions and practices as well.

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