

CLAC Paper October 17 at UNC Chapel Hill
Panel Friday AM:

Instrumental and Constitutive: One Historian's Take on Languages

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The MLA working paper on languages that we have all read for this meeting distinguishes between two positions. According to one view, broadly held outside the language profession, the benefits of learning a language are primarily instrumental—that is, language learning serves as a tool for achieving specific goals by facilitating communication with others who speak and write in a language not one's own. Those who study languages, literatures and culture hold to an opposing view that language is “constitutive” of a domain of meanings. To think of language as “constitutive” means that cultural values, experience and meaning are embedded in language. Language is not just a conveyor belt for bits of information. Rather, language encodes, preserves, and articulates the complexities of human experience—we give distinctive voice to our experience and our strivings through language. This is not to say that experience or conviction cannot be shared by people who speak different languages. It does mean, however, that what may be “lost in translation” is not trivial, but often fundamental.

The main point of my remarks is to suggest that there is no need to think of these two views as incompatible with each other; that in fact either of them may be impoverished without the other. Drawing on my own experience as a historian, I see the two approaches to language study as complementary. The good news—which may come as a surprise to many in the language professions—is that most historians manifest in their work a constitutive value of language. The bad news is that many if not most historians may only go so far as to acknowledge explicitly that language is “an indispensable tool” for their work. There is more good news than bad here, but I hope that by explaining a little more about the historian's mindset, I can help those of you who are trained primarily as teachers of language or literature to find common ground with historians in teaching and scholarship. What is true of historians may also apply in a number of other disciplines.

Let me invite you to look in on a typical annual meeting of French historians (my tribe). Although anglophone historians give their papers in English, we always relish the presence of visitors from France who give their papers in French, and the discussion is often a mix of French and English. At least one and usually two or three plenary sessions feature presentations in French, and a grand luminary from France speaks at a festive banquet. When at one meeting it came to pass that wine was inexplicably lacking at the banquet, the murmur from the audience rose to full-throated insurrection—these are French historians, after all! Occasionally a speaker tests our receptive skills by speaking at breakneck speed or indistinctly, but any conversations I have ever heard at table afterwards reflect full comprehension and an engagement in higher-level interpretation.

It can safely be said of French historians—at least those who attend meetings--that our receptive skills are very well honed and sophisticated. There may be gaps in certain registers, but historians generally have a highly nuanced understanding of academic discourse and a fairly robust acquaintance with the dialogue of everyday life and media, as encountered in their daily research routines and recreation while in France, not to mention their experience of cheap hotels and bars.

More generally, the need to navigate a temporal dimension in their work requires historians in all fields to cultivate an unusually high degree of cultural sensitivity and depth in their interpretation of language. The challenge historians take up was framed in a classic study of historical method published in 1898 (and republished in 1992!) by the two eminent French historians, Charles Seignobos (a medievalist who also wrote broad works of European synthesis) and Charles Langlois. “How does one get at the meaning of a historical document?” they asked. Apart from the question of unraveling the intentions and motives of an author, they posed the elemental challenge of understanding the language used in a context far removed from that of the historian: “To understand a text, one must first understand its language.” Unlike the uniform signs of algebra or chemistry, the language of historical documents cannot be interpreted by uniform rules, “but,” they say, “must be completed through historical interpretation based on examination of the particular case.”

Medievalists take exceptional precautions to avoid misconstruing vocabulary and concepts; they even have reference guides to usage by particular authors. Fustel de Coulanges went so far as to decree: “Two words must never be isolated from their context: that is the way to mistake their meaning.”¹ If not always so exacting, historical scholarship generally subjects texts to extensive analysis, whether we are talking about changing interpretation of the clauses of the U.S. Constitution, a Latin inscription on an ancient Roman monument, or editorials in Arabic in the Egyptian press a hundred years ago. Investigating and interpreting evidence from all relevant primary sources produced in the period under study, historians must then sift through the arguments and findings of others whose work bears upon the task at hand.

The ability of a historian to synthesize evidence and commentary requires high-level linguistic skills and—I maintain—a conception of language that is “constitutive.” Any historian, including one who is working primarily in his or her own language, must always be keenly aware of the evolution of language over time and its variation in geographical and social context. The use of any language, including our own, is constantly shaped by culture. Usage conveys insight into how people of a given time, place, and milieu understand the world around them. Eric Foner has demonstrated, for example, the rich and variable associations that have surrounded the conception of “Freedom” in American history. Ralph Waldo Emerson said it most pithily, “Language is the archives of history.”

¹ Cited from *Monarchie franque* in Ch.-V. Langlois and Ch. Seignobos, *Introduction aux études historiques* (1898), preface de Madeleine Rebérioux (Paris: Editions Kimé, 1992), 126-8.

Given all this, a surprising paradox remains: Most historians, I venture to say, reflexively consider language skills to be primarily instrumental. This is in part because they classify their own interpretive skills as historical, not linguistic. Their disciplinary identity comes with a guild bias expressed by French historians in the classification of other disciplines useful to theirs as “*sciences auxiliaires*.” Every discipline tends to think of itself as “the queen of the sciences,” and every other discipline as “auxiliary” in support of its efforts.

Another more practical factor may enter in, I think. A great many French historians I know are perfectly adept in their receptive skills, but self-consciously apologetic about their ability to speak or write fluently in the language on which they depend. “*On se débrouille*” – one muddles through, but clumsily and sometimes at a loss for words, tenses, or genders! Indeed, such limitations have sometimes impeded the ability of historians to take an active part in the curricular venture of languages across the curriculum. Both of these barriers can be addressed, I believe, by a more sustained dialogue and accommodation across disciplinary boundaries. This may in some cases mean “sheltering” the historian from undue linguistic expectations, in others it may be possible to offer positive support—in overseas semester programs for example—for historians wishing to become more fluent in speaking the language in which they do their work.

Let me reinforce the point that the constitutive and instrumental dimensions of language study are complementary by offering a personal perspective, touching on the challenges of French history, European history, and world history. Please indulge me for a few moments as I stir old memories and trace my disciplinary socialization. How did I come to employ language as a tool for my work as a historian and in what respects can my disciplinary *habitus* (to invoke Bourdieu’s conception) be construed as constitutive?

My opportunity for language learning was unusual, since I grew up as a foreign service brat. My preferred language as a three-year-old in Ecuador was Spanish, a language I lost and only partially regained through study and work decades later at NEH. My first exposure to French was through Edith Piaf records my father brought back from Paris on his return from a UN assignment to Kashmir in 1948. I discovered Paris myself as a wide-eyed kid in brief stays there the next two summers. Memories of chocolate éclairs and croissants, the Eiffel tower, Montmartre and the Métropolitain vividly impressed themselves. Since my mother was leading a study trip on postwar Europe, I also visited a camp for displaced persons outside Paris, and the bustling Renault factory, nationalized after the Liberation. After two-year spells in Egypt and India and a year living with my grandmother in Duluth, Minnesota, I spent my high school years in England, which was where I developed a lifetime bond with French culture through holiday exchanges as the guest of a large and lively family in the gritty industrial town of St. Étienne.

I became a French historian as an undergraduate at Harvard. I took a French literature survey as a Freshman and in history courses plunged into French sources in the Widener Library for my research papers, benefiting from the teaching of William L. Langer, Stanley Hoffmann and Laurence Wylie, a diplomatic historian, a scholar of politics, and a

French teacher turned cultural anthropologist, respectively. When I went on to graduate school at Wisconsin, I entered yet another vital community of scholars passionately interested in French history and culture. Our mentors inspired a large cohort of students fascinated with French ideas (Camus and Sartre were iconic figures; but so too were Jean Jaurès, Honoré Daumier and many others). The glamour of French culture held a strong attraction. We were the generation, after all, that stood up to sing the Marseillaise with the patrons of Rick's bar in *Casablanca* and were moved by the pathos of the young waif who almost set his apartment on fire lighting a candle before an improvised shrine to Balzac in the Truffaut film "The 400 Blows." And who having seen that film will forget the archtypal depiction of the public school where the crabbed old *instituteur* in his smock writes out a fable of La Fontaine on the blackboard while the boys cook up mischief behind his back? On another plane, the anguished history of French decolonization was fresh in our minds when the "teach-ins" on campus framed the debate over our own involvement in Vietnam.

As a graduate student, I first pursued an interest in the Enlightenment and the social history of ideas. Inspired by Peter Gay's work on Voltaire's politics and Franklin Ford's on the ideology of the *noblesse de robe*, I wrote an M.A. thesis on Voltaire's critique of Montesquieu. To compare the two involved style as well as substance: Montesquieu crafted aphorisms as a way of distilling the relationship between politics, society, and culture in the context of historical development and environmental influences; Sainte-Beuve counted Voltaire's letters among the finest models of literary style. I recommend the writings of both authors for adoption in CLAC courses!

It was only a matter of time before I fell under the spell of the *Annales* school of history, which had a profound influence on the practice of historians generally in the 1960s. Reviving the broad perspectives of Montesquieu, the *annalistes* expanded the modern academic conception of history as it was practiced in France in the early twentieth century—primarily political and diplomatic—to include economy, society, and *civilisation*. Fernand Braudel's pathbreaking study of the Mediterranean began as a doctoral thesis in which he proposed to interpret the politics and diplomacy of Philip II of Spain from a Mediterranean perspective. But geography took hold—physical geography, human and cultural geography, and the geography of trade, finance, diplomacy, and war. This new *demarche* drew strength, no doubt, from a long and fruitful cohabitation of history and geography in the French curriculum. Meanwhile, the study of demography, a field highly developed in France as a consequence of a century-long obsession with depopulation, contributed to new quantitative approaches to social history. Lucien Febvre, editor of the *Annales* along with Marc Bloch, laid down the law to historians: they must learn to count!

Then came the history of *mentalités*, modeled by Lucien Febvre in his inquiry into the religion of Rabelais, asking whether "unbelief" was conceptually possible in his time. Other influences in the American academy reinforced the program of the *annalistes* among historians. As the ACTFL "comparison" standard suggests, study of another culture—in this case academic and disciplinary culture--invited comparison with one's own. William Langer, whose Harvard lectures on nineteenth-century Europe strayed

little from politics and diplomacy, had issued a call for interdisciplinary history in his presidential address to the American Historical Association, citing the historical importance of the potato in nineteenth-century Europe and suggesting that psychoanalysis might have something to teach historians! In my sophomore history seminar we had grappled with the question whether history was social science or humanistic literature. Herodotus could be story-teller or anthropologist; Thucydides could be political scientist or the creator of a grand historical myth for the Greeks.

Do not be surprised, then, if you find social science historians in academic divisions that carry the label “humanities” and “literary” historians in history departments that have been ranged under the social sciences. Most of us are loath to yield interdisciplinary terrain. All but a few hardened positivists cherish humanistic narrative; at the same time, most of us draw to a greater or lesser degree upon the empirical methodologies of the social sciences. I am perhaps a little out of the mainstream of historians in holding that all human knowledge, including the physical sciences, involves interpretation, and all species of knowledge cling to a humanistic thread spun from the storehouse of philosophy and *litterae humaniores*. Most historians agree, however, that as methodologies in all fields become more specialized, we cannot afford to lose sight of their underlying relatedness. Accordingly, historians’ use of languages is very broadly “constitutive” to an extent that may press the bounds envisioned by the MLA, extending to all fields of knowledge that can be requisitioned to supply the grist for historical inquiry.

I pursued my dissertation research on eighteenth-century social policy (specifically, a royal initiative of the 1760s to place the repression of begging under central bureaucratic control) avidly consulting the little guide to research on the Old Regime prepared by Robert Mandrou, whose *maître* was the indefatigable Lucien Febvre. Mandrou’s guide in the Nouvelle Clio series set out leading questions and new approaches and told how to find the raw materials for an expanded research agenda in the archives. My experience on a Fulbright in 1969-70 inducted me into the world of French libraries and archives and into a dialogue with French scholars, a dialogue in which the French language was truly constitutive as well as instrumental.

After another spell of research that eventually led to publication of a book, and a patchwork of teaching experiences that even included some teaching of French, my career took a turn toward the federal bureaucracy. I enjoyed a rich two decades of experience at NEH working with teachers and scholars across all disciplines of the humanities—in particular with teachers of foreign languages. On the side, I pursued a long-term project to write a broadly European synthesis that I am still working on in retirement, which I call “Europe’s Welfare Traditions: Reform Without End.”

This shift to a broader European focus for my research and writing has impressed on me the significance of going beyond a first foreign language to master others at least to the point of being able to read essential primary works and encounter previously unfamiliar domains of historiography. I branched out into German, summoning a strenuous effort to build on undergraduate beginnings. I still use translations whenever they are available; I

all too quickly lose the thread of a lecture in German; I am virtually speechless in the language of Goethe. My experience in German-speaking lands has been limited to two brief visits to Vienna and a history meeting in Berlin followed by travel to Weimar, Eisenach, and southward across Lake Constance to St. Gall in Switzerland (a lovely spot where my wife and I visited with a young French friend and his German Swiss wife, both language teachers!) My great fortune has been to be able to attend the programs of the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., and to use its library.

Without going into further detail of my linguistic itinerary, I can claim to have had some further success using Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and even a little Dutch in the course of my current project on welfare and poverty. Some commonalities emerge clearly through language, for example the shared conceptual category of the shamefaced poor--those who have fallen in the social hierarchy and deserve discrete charity: the *pauvres honteux* in French, *poveri vergognesi* in Italian, the *pobres vergonhados* in Portuguese. On the other hand, each language imbeds a variety of cultural notions and practices that are expressed distinctively. In the sixteenth-century Spanish classic *Lazarillo de Tormes*, the washerwomen who nurse the young beggar after a serious beating soon roust him out of sickbed impatiently, telling him not to loaf and mooch like a “gallofero,” a unique Spanish term that refers specifically to beggars who hang around monasteries waiting for a handout!² Much of the terminology of the modern welfare state exhibits national subtleties: “la protection sociale” in French, for example, and “der Sozialstaat” in German.

Venturing beyond English and French has opened my eyes—and ears--in many ways to new historical understanding, and however partial my account of European social welfare will be in the end, I know that my efforts to become more broadly proficient in language have been both instrumental and constitutive.

Admirable works of synthesis in European history have drawn on multiple languages. A model achievement in my field is the astute synthesis by Peter Baldwin, *The Politics of Social Solidarity: Class Bases of the European Welfare State, 1875-1975*, which draws on Danish and Swedish sources as well as English, French, and German. A more widely celebrated example, already mentioned, is Fernand Braudel’s panorama of the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, one of the great monuments to the *Annales* vision of structures and change in history. In addition to his native French, Braudel drew directly on scholarship in English, German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. Further, he weighed with care the work of scholars from a wide range of disciplines who were conversant with Arabic, Turkish, and the languages of the Balkans. Few historians will ever be fluent in all the languages and cultures of Europe, but every historian who pushes the linguistic boundaries contributes to an effort that is of necessity cumulative and collective

This leads me to reflection on the ultimate challenge of world history. It is obvious that the study of history beyond the confines of the Americas and Europe requires linguistic

² See explanatory note by Claudio Guillén in the Laurel Language Library edition of *Lazarillo de Tormes and El Abencerraje* (New York: Dell, 1966), 78. The term “gallofa” refers to the handout of food.

expertise that now has only a limited resource base in the United States. Like the study of Europe, the study of East Asia depends on a group of historians who are fluent in at least one major language of the region—Mandarin, Japanese, or Korean, in particular—and who may also use one or more European language in support of their scholarship. A separate cluster of languages is needed for Southeast Asia—likewise for the South Asian subcontinent and for Central Asia. A speaker I heard at a meeting of the teachers of less commonly taught languages recounted that learning Turkish had been a gateway for his learning related languages of Central Asia in the course of his diplomatic career. Moving to the continent of Africa we discover a language map of staggering variety, while students wishing to learn about the Arab world must confront the great disparity of spoken Arabic and may need to study additional languages such as Berber. To pursue comparative Islamic studies may likewise require learning languages other than Arabic, such a Farsi, Urdu, and the languages of Southeast Asia.

In short, any synthetic, thematic, or comparative study of world history has to be a collaborative enterprise, with a criss-crossing network of multiple fluencies. No doubt historians will begin with an interest in some particular culture area and its language or languages. If a particular question or a particular approach to their research leads them into areas beyond their language proficiency, they must, like anthropologists, either invest the time required to communicate in a new language, or depend on intermediaries. Tamara Hareven, a leading pioneer in the field of family history, used interpreters in her study of the life-course experience of Japanese weavers, an inquiry that grew out of her historical study in family history in New England industrial communities.³ Her comparative knowledge of American and European life-course issues led her to pose questions so apt that the subjects asked, through an interpreter, how she knew to ask them!

On the other hand, some historical studies cannot be done without arduous investment in language study. This is particularly true of studies that require working with documents in languages or dialects that are no longer spoken or belong to small language communities. A remarkable example of such research appeared in the *Journal of World History* recently, an article with the intriguing title, “‘The Salt in a Merchant’s Letter’: The Culture of Julfan Correspondence in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean.” The broad context for the study arose from historians’ interest in learning how merchants managed in earlier periods to “maintain,” (in the words of Claude Markovits), “a constant flow of information within the network that ensures its success.” Historian Sebouh Aslanian approached this question through the study of a large body of correspondence captured by the British in 1748 from an Armenian-freighted ship in the Indian Ocean, which he combined with collections in Venice and in Isfahan. The 1700 captured letters were written in a “peculiar dialect of Julfan Armenian [now defunct] that flourished between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries throughout the commercial settlements where Julfans resided, especially in India and the Far East.” Aslanian explains that it was so different from other dialects that “it was and still is nearly incomprehensible to

³ See especially her remarks on the value of cross-cultural research in Tamara K. Hareven, *Families, History, and Social Change* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), 333.

most Armenians.” For that very reason it was useful as a means of confidential communication.⁴

Given the conundrum of deciding what languages a scholar of world history should master, I highly recommend Michael Ostler’s recent book, *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World* (New York: Harper, 2005). It will doubtless appeal to language professionals as a comprehensive interpretation of how languages developed, spread, and lost ground over the centuries. At the same time, it could provide a course framework for a teacher of world history, since it synthesizes the evolution of languages with the history of empires, culture, and trade.

These examples suggest the range of language strategies that world historians have to employ in order to answer important questions in their field. I hope that in touching on these challenges I can also invoke the need for flexibility and resourcefulness in combining constitutive and instrumental notions of language study. I maintain: (1) that any historian needs to be fluent in at least one language other than his or her own, (2) that there are great advantages, instrumental and constitutive, to learning a third language, and (3) that the attainment of useful levels of proficiency in multiple languages is often feasible within language families. Perhaps most important, (4) most of us face serious practical limitations on the degree of proficiency we can obtain in multiple languages. We only truly learn what we are prepared to use, much as we may wish to satisfy a Gargantuan appetite to become “un abysme de science” (a bottomless pit of knowledge, a model of learning that Rabelais’ Gargantua urged upon his university-bound son Pantagruel).

Recognizing the limits on language acquisition and cultural familiarity, we need to be realistic in recognizing the usefulness of various levels of proficiency for various purposes. Historians need to combine direct knowledge of sources and interpretations in their original language with a heightened emphasis on expert synthesis of secondary sources and the effective use of intermediaries—not only translators, but colleagues from all fields of history and cultural study with whom we can pool our knowledge, linguistic and historical. To do a good job of teaching history, historians stand to benefit enormously from a reciprocal partnership with the language profession, in a way that will give students not only the tools they need, but also the understanding and confidence to use those tools well.

⁴ Sebouh Aslanian, “‘The Salt in a Merchant’s Letter’: The Culture of Julfan correspondence in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean,” *Journal of World History*, 19:2 (June 2008), 127-188, esp.145.