Foreign Languages: A Discipline in Crisis

Janet Swaffar

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THE word “crisis” may strike readers as a gross exaggeration to describe a field whose presence as a recognized discipline in American secondary and postsecondary education remains unchallenged as we move into the twenty-first century. Crisis is a word used to describe potential apocalypse in a world beset with major economic, political, ecological, and military problems. The use of this term in the context of our discipline, referring as it must to a lesser scale of crisis with comparatively benign stakes, can only be justified with dictionary definitions. Webster’s defines crisis as “a turning point in anything, a decisive or crucial time, stage, or event.” It is in this sense, I would argue, that our discipline finds itself in a crisis—a crisis of identity and accountability. We confront a moment of critical transition about what we do and how we value and evaluate what we do. Not by choice, but by circumstances, we face choosing between traditional ways of doing business and changing in response to the needs of higher education in the North America of today.

We honor Heidi Byrnes because she has been in the vanguard articulating such responses, providing forums for discussion and tangible solutions to our professional problems. If a single person can, indeed, embody the pivotal changes necessary for foreign languages as a discipline to thrive in North America, Heidi Byrnes is that person. Her teamwork is legendary: her work with the Northeast Conference, the AATG, the MLA, and ACTFL all model the means necessary to address the identity and accountability crisis in our discipline: cooperative effort that yields local as well as national change.

Heidi, in her publications and her extensive professional service, embodies the three styles of cooperative effort our profession must engage in to render us accountable to our academic institutions: interorganizational teamwork such as ACTFL’s OPI and her later work in developing the AATG Standards, institutional teamwork with one’s own department and programs across campus, and research in and dissemination about the impact of projects undertaken. Let me emphasize that these three points—interorganizational teamwork, intraintitutional teamwork, and research and dissemination—do not represent the inventory of Heidi Byrnes’s contributions to the profession. They characterize only that aspect of her work that seems to me to go to the heart of the current crisis in foreign languages as a discipline: our need to change our traditional assumptions and the consequent way we have been doing business. As I view her career, Heidi Byrnes has consistently focused on confronting pernicious assumptions about our identity as a profession and seeking solutions to problems resulting from our uncertain sense of self.

Let me briefly address these assumptions and the problematic practices that have contributed to what I see as the current crisis in our disciplinary identity. Pernicious assumption 1: we teach language to beginners and then fine-tune or ignore altogether performance development in upper-division or advanced coursework. For advanced learners and graduate students, content courses often ignore the content of language performance—whether the performed language of the text or the students’ articulated grasp of its messages. These pervasive practices lead to curious curricular disjunctures. Courses for foreign language beginners present language qua language skills to the exclusion of all but minimal opportunities to assess texts (which I define broadly as cultural artifacts in
any medium). Courses for advanced learners, meanwhile, focus on informational content to the virtual exclusion of the ways in which language frames and mediates that information.

True, most programs offer upper-division language courses that offer advanced grammar or conversation, but, I would argue, that content rarely translates into student use of discourse tools that employ what Claire Kramsch proposes as "social semiotic," Richard Kern characterizes as "literacy communication" ("Reconciling" 22) and Byrnes as "multiple literacies" ("Language" 29). By separating the notion of language learning from learning about something in that language, our discipline mires itself in a quandary of proficiency before cognitive engagement—a quandary that, in my view, puts the cart before the horse, the wood, nails, hammers, and saws before the construction plans.

Equally devastating, our discipline's second pervasive assumption contributes to our identity crisis by putting the horse out to pasture, constructing edifices to learning without plans. Simply stated, pernicious assumption 2 is that course offerings stem solely from an individual scholar rather than team effort, a view held tacitly by most members of our discipline and, I must admit, understandably so. In the humanities, entrenched ideas about academic freedom and intellectual autonomy have traditionally dictated that individuals, not collaborative effort, create courses and shape curricula. Privately, most of us recognize that courses created by lone scholars often fail to reflect expectations, content, and assessment measures of fellow faculty members' courses.

Unfortunately, departmental faculty members, whether in large departments or small, tend to assume publicly that a rational progression of language and content learning is represented in their course proposals. Colleagues rarely challenge the comfortable assumption that everyone in the department follows a single model in constructing tests, creating quizzes and assignments, and grading spoken or written work. Such public positions, however, rarely hold up under scrutiny. In Byrnes's extensive and my own more limited experience as external reviewers in institutions of various types and sizes, we see that upper-division offerings often confront students with widely varying pedagogical designs and expectations, depending on the training and background of available professors. However felicitous the individual course offerings, they cannot represent focused preparation or coherent stages in a progression toward shared, clearly identified objectives.

I recognize that nothing I have claimed so far is news or new. For well over a decade now, our professional organizations, their policies, and journals have addressed these issues. The ADFL Bulletin and Profession have brought voices together from both sides of the language-content divide in productive fashion. Ever since Dorothy James elicited two issues worth of commentary in the ADFL Bulletin five years ago merely by wondering in print just "who is minding the store," these assumptions have been subject to reexamination in increasingly open discussion. Their significance as an identity and accountability problem for us all is reflected in ongoing trends in the profession.

One sign of the times is an administrative tendency to cut positions in language and literature. Last year those cuts produced a dramatic national trend. On 14 December 2002 the New York Times picked up the MLA story that job listings in language teaching were down 21% as compared with the year before (Arens). Further, the article noted that the drop may prove even more severe since some of the listed jobs may subsequently be cancelled because of lack of funds. Often job candidates return from a successful interview to learn that their prospective position has evaporated.

Identity plays a central role here as well. One explanation for this drop in available positions in foreign language departments is that the many deans and presidents find language departments difficult and have, increasingly in the past decade, responded by eliminating them (e.g., Drake University), by merging individual languages into a single department, or by placing them under the aegis of English or another rubric in the humanities (Porter and Sanders). Again, an assumption that we move from lone scholar status to teamwork and exchanging of ideas seems to be increasingly relevant.

As for the notion that language must be taught as separate from content, a number of administrators have accepted this pernicious assumption and tried to solve the vexing area of language education versus literature by proposing language centers. One dean describes a facet of what I call the language-content split as the "vaguely schizophrenic" department with scholarly life on the one side "and the lower-division language teaching life of the department on the other." This dean is convinced that "some mechanism must be in place at every university so that applied linguists, the teachers genuinely and creatively concerned with lower-division language instruction, will be provided with an administrative 'space' where they can all come together so that their research, their
concerns, their innovations, and their solutions can be shared and properly valued” (LaRiviere 246).

Such an assertion castigates language departments across the country. It implies that the subaltern status many departments assign to teachers of language, often with lecturer or senior lecturer status, have left administrators with few alternatives save recourse to introducing a variety of language centers so that applied linguists will not be isolated, powerless, and unappreciated. What does such an assertion by the dean of a major research institution say about the language departments in prestigious places such as Stanford, Columbia, Rice, Berkeley, or Brown, all of which have a type of language center designed to augment departmental programs or to teach language to beginning students of major languages? Simply this, that as a discipline, foreign languages are contributing to a new institutional structure emerging from their own passé assumptions. In today’s culture of tight budgets, when language and content appear incommensurate, making for an inefficient partnership, administrators will divorce them or take whatever other measures they deem warranted to reduce the impact of that ineffectiveness on the larger academic community.

I am not suggesting that foreign language centers are necessarily a bad institutional practice. My quarrel is with the fact that often the language-content schism that led to the creation of centers persists as a problem in the interaction between center faculty and its students on the one hand and departmental faculty and its expectations about those students on the other. Perhaps indicative of the pervasive difference in status or prestige, Elizabeth Bernhardt writes that while university-wide recognition is awarded instructors at the language center at Stanford, that recognition has not translated into the salary scale she feels they merit (248).

I must, at this point, add that many departments across the country are addressing their identity status and attendant questions related to the survival of foreign languages as a major discipline by responding to institutional downsizing in intelligent ways. I am thinking, for example, of the careful, consultant-guided procedures used by Mansfield University when it merged English and foreign languages departments (Porter and Sanders). Responding effectively to very different pressures, new multilingual departments report on ways to serve their various language constituencies in the face of burgeoning Spanish enrollments (Nichols). Similarly, the changed requirements in general education at the State University of New York, Binghamton, became the impetus from which the university’s German program survived with a first-year German requirement built around the relation between language and thought, a sequence emphasizing how language relates to cultural actions and perception (Morewedge).

In other positive responses to pernicious assumptions about disciplinary identity and accountability, departments large and small are engaging in outreach to secondary schools (Belgum and Maxim; Jensen; Melin and Van Dyke). Increasingly, colleges and universities across the country report implementing programs that utilize the language, thought, and content relation. I am thinking here of the MLA sessions on courses using dual text translations or assessment of translations in their cultural context (Brown; Ross; Seyhan), on the use of various media to teach culture (Kramer; Stephens), on new interdisciplinary majors (Duvick), and on the impetus in graduate courses to provide textual dimensions to cultural studies by exploring how language reveals the construction of knowledge in societies (Yaari).

At the same time, I caution that these measures cannot succeed without the shared larger vision that characterizes Byrnes’s work: the tenet that our discipline must continue to develop and jointly claim these indexes of new assumptions about what we do and how we do it. Byrnes is one of the most audible and visible among those in foreign languages who challenge the problematic policies that characterize our pernicious assumptions: she has argued that beginning, advanced, and graduate studies represent facets of the same whole, not separate issues (“Reconsidering”); the Georgetown teamwork in redesigning its language program demonstrates that faculty members with different specialties share the core of a common disciplinary cause; the curricular axis of that program demonstrates ways that language, thought, and content can be taught as integral—not separate—as the intellectual components whose merger identifies our field.

As Byrnes has stated repeatedly, foreign languages can’t have content without language. She has become a vector for all of us in the profession who believe we must “develop a principled and coherent understanding of the relation among language, language use, and socioculturally and linguistically constructed knowledge” (“Language”).

The German department at Georgetown has, in no small measure because of the initiative and drive of Heidi Byrnes, implemented such thinking in a curricular program in which language and content are reinte-
grated into a coherent, accountable sequence of courses. As a model of new tenets about foreign language acquisition in the postsecondary schools, the processes, implementation, and assessments of that effort are public domain. All of us can refer to them. Byrnes and her colleagues have written about the program extensively, and its materials and procedures are available on the Georgetown German department’s Web site.

The process of developing such a curriculum reflects many of the features David Goldberg and Elizabeth Welles report on in “Successful College and University Foreign Language Programs, 1995–99”: time dedicated to consultation with outside experts, internal discussion of the departmental mission by faculty members, review of current educational theories and research on their application to the content of a new curriculum. For the Georgetown project, input from graduate students and from those most involved in language coordination at beginning levels was incorporated at all points. Strategies were agreed on for joining initial emphasis on oral work to understanding texts in various media and writing about that understanding, consistent with the overall objectives of the departmental program and its particular mission for Georgetown University.

The goal of literacy lies at the core of this and any curriculum designed to teach a foreign language by structuring courses that enable students to discover how the content of a culture is mediated through language. Richard Kern defines literacy as the ability to create and interpret meaning through texts (“Reconciling” 21). That definition elegantly deals with questions about language performance that plague discussions of mission and accountability in teaching foreign languages. It puts the role of language proficiency in the new context I have been attempting to identify in this paper. Rather than assess progress in foreign language learning according to traditional standards of grammaticality, the goal of foreign language literacy is to assess student use of language to engage in intellectual discovery and acquire a spoken and written command of the foreign language with which to convey ideas intelligibly and effectively.

In a recent ADFL article, Byrnes (“Language”) points to the practical consequences of using texts, broadly defined, as the basis for a curriculum. She stresses that literacy is multivalent. Just as a nation has no single culture, all literacy in that culture is multiple. As the key to unlocking this multiplicity, courses in the text-based curriculum Byrnes envisions must focus on a culture’s genres as the key to uncovering the particular literacy they reflect—their specific sociolinguistic messages. In essence, such curricula put tools of literary theorists into the hands of students by asking them to look for distinctions in who says what, by asking them to distinguish between the registers and sentence structures of various voices in that text. Students who can identify the social interactions in movies, stories, essays, plays, songs, and Internet sites will have little difficulty identifying characteristics of the readers, listeners, or viewers of those interactions.

When we in German studies argue that no one is literate without having read Kafka’s Metamorphosis, we enter into a debate we cannot win (“Austrian literature is more important than that of Latin America or the Middle East”); if, in contrast, we argue that learning to read Kafka in the German language teaches us much about how language-specific patterns convey the psychological impact of stereotypes (as a case study in the power of discourse), then we can ask students to find examples and explore how Kafka’s semiotics of social interaction and responses to social pressures reveal those stereotypes. Reading Kafka becomes a study of language as meaning.

As a response to the crisis in our discipline’s identity, the Georgetown curriculum offers a model alternative to historically pervasive assumptions and their institutional liabilities. Giving equal voice to all its faculty members, the department there developed course sequences that join learning language to learning cultural and social meanings at all levels of instruction. While by no means Byrnes’s only legacy to the profession, her role in that ongoing process of development and assessment is perhaps most representative of her conviction that language, cognitive processes, and the content of multiple texts in many genres are inseparable facets of our discipline. Her leadership in joint curriculum planning within her department demonstrates to us all the means and the ways to develop a foreign language program based on cross-cultural perspectives and the consciousness of historical and geographical difference.

As a case study in a new operational framework for our discipline, the Georgetown program points to the pragmatics of a viable identity and accountability, providing systematic measures that serve foreign language students’ practical needs in today’s postsecondary schools, yet standing firmly within the purview of a humanist education. As such, the program is a disciplinary response to our identity crisis, a response that models a coherent course sequence.
anchored in multiple textual genres, enabling students from the outset of instruction to discover and to express similarities and differences between and within culturally anchored discourses and to articulate their implications. A living legacy, the program renders concrete and palpable Heidi Byrnes’s timeless collegiality, her commitment to teaching, her extensive scholarship, and her holistic vision of our field.

Notes
1 The decline in tenure-track positions was somewhat less (16%).
2 The wide variety of centers renders this designation misleading as an umbrella term. Centers such as the one at Yale serve undergraduate students as technological resources. The University of Pennsylvania’s center serves beginners in less commonly taught languages. For a comprehensive overview, see Garrett.
3 I speak from firsthand knowledge: I participated at an early stage of the program’s development and at later stages had the opportunity to visit classes and talk informally with Georgetown students and faculty members.

Works Cited