

# Languages Introduction (please read through instructions slowly before beginning your responses.):

Everything about our experiences of learning anything involves language – speaking, writing, signing; it is so integral to our day to day lives that we hardly give it a thought until we lose our voice or are in situations that make us afraid or otherwise uncertain what to say or how to say it.

Literature in any language spoken, written, sung is all about what language does. I'd like to begin this course on Writing Through Literature with some consideration of our uses of language.

First, read and think about the following quotes:

**The fact that I  
am writing to you  
already falsifies what I  
wanted to tell you.  
My subject:  
how to explain to you that I  
don't belong to English  
though I belong nowhere else.**

Gustavo Perez Firmat, epigraph of Junot Diaz, *Drown*, Riverhead Books, 1996. Firmat is a Cuban writer who teaches Spanish and Spanish & Latinx culture and literature to students at Columbia University in New York City.

**“a majority of the people I belonged to live in conformity . . . they had no choice . . . they . . . kept to the scope appropriate to them, where, except in little things, there was no cause to seek a language that deviated from the one formulated for them by the state, by language's custodians.”**

Wolfgang Hilbig, *The Tidings of the Trees*, 2010. Translated from the German by Isabel Fargo Cole, Two Lines Press, 2018, pp. 63-64. Hilbig was a German author and poet much of whose work focused on the struggles of the individual to live in a totalitarian society such as the one he lived in East Germany.

What are these two writers saying?

1. What does the word language mean to you?
2. What languages other than English do you use? Where, when and with whom do you use them? If you only use English, what various ways do you use it?
3. What other languages besides the ones you use do you hear or see in your neighborhood, where you work or shop?
4. In what situations are you most at ease, most fluent, using language? Why do you think that is?
5. In what situations are you least at ease, least fluent? Why do you think that is?
6. How are your experiences with writing in a language different from speaking or signing in a language? Which are you most confident doing? Why do you think that is?
7. What has been your experience using language, written, spoken and/or signed in school? Is it different from how you use it in other places? What makes it different or the same? Has your experience in Spring I and II with distance learning made any difference in your uses of language and/or your confidence in communicating with teachers and other students? Explain the difference if any.

In terms of language, where and to whom do you belong?

Next, consider the following questions about your experiences with language. Read through them all before starting to respond. Take your time and answer any or all that you wish to, in any order, or make up your own questions to suit your way with words on this subject:

Let me share a little of my own experience:

English is my first and pretty much only language; When I moved with my family from southern Ontario to New England at the age of eight, my mother started correcting my pronunciation of certain words like cawr for car and wheya for where. I hadn't noticed and never really cared to reform myself. When I visited my grandmother in Belfast, Northern Ireland when I was 17, I was charmed by the way she spoke English; I came home imitating her expressions: "no harm in a joke, sure there's not?" "Just a bunch a hooligans cause of the troubles, sure." The word, sure, ended many of her declarations, with a questioning lift of the voice, typical of the Northern Irish accent to this day. It was the summer of 1969, and the troubles she was referring to were "The Troubles," which that Summer had violently reignited 400 years of struggle with what more or less boils down to "The English," sure.

In my early years of school, I experienced bullying. Teachers didn't help, so I shut up for a long time. It was not until the 10<sup>th</sup> grade when a teacher made American History so provoking, I forgot I was shy; my newfound eagerness to engage thrilled me and thrilled my teacher. Mr. Girard was his name; I loved him. The same eagerness to engage in meaningful discussion thrills me as teacher to this day. My experience of bullying in school has made me very aware that fear is a terrible silencer, and classrooms real or virtual must be made safe spaces to speak, to sign, to write our thoughts on subjects we are learning about.

Having lived in New York City for the last 40 years, I have heard many languages that I don't understand except to sense the emotion behind the words as when people are smiling with pleasure or gritting their teeth and turning their faces away in disgust. I can say the sounds of diverse voices are one reason I love New York City. I see all kinds of alphabets that look like dancing figures to me, not words. I can read signs in Spanish and understand a little of a conversation if I know the context of it, as when I am with my husband's Ecuadorian family and they converse in Spanish, stopping now and again to translate for me. Sometimes I already have the gist of it. I should after 37 years! My husband and I have always conversed in English because when we first met he was anxious to improve his English. I've picked up a few words, mostly curses or commands which I use to talk to my pets when I want them to come or get out: "ben aca" sweetly or "bete para alla" roughly. I find animals very easy to communicate with; you can talk nonsense words; it speaks all the same love to them and back at you. When I first wrote ben and bete here, I did so phonetically as they sounded to my ear; my husband did not correct me; they are only spoken words in my use of them, and I wrote them the way I hear them. He has been "in English" with me so long and rarely writes in Spanish, that he did not pick up on the error. My daughter who learned Spanish in school saw it right away: the b should be v. I mention it here because it illustrates something about school learning that I think is significant: we are taught to value correctness above all else, and correctness is an important value, but it is not everything; my pets and I never give it a thought, nor should we in the context in which I address them. Besides, I was a little annoyed that my daughter's only comment on my writing was about a spelling error. She is a beautiful person and an excellent writer, but a little over-schooled in my opinion.

The shift to distance learning has complicated my feelings about language use. The language of the machine, as I call the computer, is often confusing to me; my lack of fluency makes me feel shy again. I am sure it is why I have chosen the asynchronous mode of engagement. I intend to learn more how to use the computer to communicate, but I need to do it at my own snail's pace. One thing I have actually liked about this new learning environment is reading and responding to students; at some of the most distressing times in the past couple of months, reading student writing was a welcome pause for me, a stepping away into a quiet place of sorts, a reading of words slowly, deliberately, that felt like listening and being listened to. How can words across a screen do that? I can't say for sure. It is language, and I'm glad for it, sure.

Lastly, try your hand at translating the following sentence in any way, in any language(s) you choose:

O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.

Micah 6:8 KJV (The King James Version is an English translation of Biblical texts in Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek in what is called modern English, although it was published in 1611 and contains forms of words no longer commonly used in modern English today. That's a living language for you.)

If you write it in a language other than English, you can try translating it back into some kind of English if you want to.

Please submit this assignment before the end of the first week of classes (on or before September 18) and include with it your preferred email address and telephone number for communication. Please also indicate the name you prefer to be addressed as, if it is different than the one on the official roster. I am happy to be addressed as Professor Foster or Judith or Judith Nell, whatever you are comfortable with, but never Judy. I have disliked that nickname since third grade when classmates on the playground teased me with the song popular on the radio at the time, "It's Judy's Turn to Cry." I believe a name is an important part of an individual's identity, and everyone should insist on being addressed as they choose to be. I look forward to reading your introductions. Be well.

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Contributed by: Judith Nell Foster. "Languages Introduction."