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Who We Really Are? Disciplinary Struggles and the Role of Literature in Language Departments

Luciano Martínez

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Name-Change Trends

In "What Should We Call Ourselves?," Cynthia Sloan traces the history and genealogy of the debate surrounding name changes of academic departments and reflects on the implications the choice of nomenclature carries for how we present what we teach to students and how we advocate for our discipline within our institutions and the larger academic world.

Academic departments have undergone name changes throughout the years, and those changes have given more or less attention to one of the elements of our disciplinary triad: languages, literatures, cultures. Perhaps the most salient change was the movement away from *foreign languages* (in some cases *modern languages*) to *world languages*. The goal was to overcome a rhetoric of foreignness and the term's negative connotations (a notion of otherness and not belonging that is particularly striking in the case of Spanish, the "foreign national language" of the United States, to use the metaphor coined by Carlos Alonso).[1] In some instances, as is well known, these department name changes were not motivated by aims toward inclusion but rather were due to budget cuts that triggered the merging of separate language departments into bigger and more generalized units.

This is not an isolated trend: even private and public institutions with vast resources—generally with robust doctoral programs and separate departments for individual languages or subgroups by geographic regions or language families (e.g., Romance languages, East Asian languages, Slavic languages)—have also renamed their academic units. The most salient change was to replace *language and literature* with *studies* (e.g., francophone studies, Hispanic studies, East Asian studies).[2] The goal—I suspect—was to deemphasize literature and language to signal new trends in the field that point toward multidisciplinarity and cultural and literacy studies, with ensuing new objects of study that moved beyond print literacy.

In sum, several individual-language and multilanguage departments have relinquished the word *literature* or *literatures* from their names. It could be argued that this constant drive for renaming ourselves reflects trends in knowledge production within the humanities; however, as Sloan describes, this drive for renaming also attests to ongoing pressures that, since the 1970s, have called for curriculum redesigns and shifts in pedagogical and methodological orientations in response to enrollment pressures. One thing is clear: we have been unable to settle on a name, and this is a matter of critical importance; as Domna Stanton explains, "[N]ame affects emphases in the curriculum and pedagogy, what we understand to be theory, and of

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course our hiring priorities" (21). I also wonder if name changes make us more, or less, accessible and comprehensible for undergraduate students.[3]

Sloan says her department's advisory council entertained the idea of changing the department's name from the Department of World Language and Literatures into either the Department of World Languages and Cultures or the Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, the latter being considered too burdensome. The most practical option, then, would be to substitute *literatures* with *cultures*. Sloan makes an eloquent defense for keeping *literature* in her department name and also reflects on the intellectual rationale and pedagogical implications of adding the word *cultures*. Dropping *literature* to move into a language-culture binary creates, according to Sloan, a series of problems and risks. At an intellectual and epistemological level, she wonders what happens when we identify as "educators focused on culture but do not arrive at approaches for teaching culture that correspond to our disciplinary foci." Furthermore, how do we differentiate ourselves from disciplines like anthropology and sociology for which culture is the principal subject? At an institutional level, removing any direct reference to literary studies, in Sloan's view, makes us more vulnerable to program cuts and to the shifting of language learning into training centers.

The Culture Talk

One of the most striking aspects of Sloan's article is her analysis of the so-called cultural turn. Before delving into her defense of the centrality of literary studies in our departments, Sloan wonders why we are having "the culture talk" yet again. While the influence of cultural criticism and cultural studies in literary scholarship is unmistakable, Sloan notices "[t]he failure of cultural studies in departments of world languages and literatures to focus on particular cultures as articulated through their respective languages." As a professor at a four-year institution, I can attest to the difficulties of transferring the topics of cultural studies to a second-language classroom where achieving linguistic competence is the primary goal. Undoubtedly, cultural studies opened new territories to scholarship and contributed a new vocabulary to literary studies as such studies moved away from poststructuralism. Nonetheless, in my view, there is a lack of appropriate articulation between the graduate curriculum and the educational needs of our undergraduate students. For example, the teaching-methods course commonly taught in graduate language departments is not sufficient preparation to approach the challenges of teaching our increasingly diverse and multilingual students. The focus seems to be on training graduate students to teach world languages as foreign languages or second languages; little or no attention is given to heritage language teaching.[4] Moreover, there is a need to offer explicit preparation on how to teach, as Sloan calls it, "literature in another language, from another culture."[5]

The decreased relevance of literary studies in exchange for (supposedly) more attractive cultural topics within language departments has another unintended consequence: duplicate or very similar academic courses across humanities and social sciences. Browsing online course catalogs, one notices it is unmistakably evident that

literature has migrated to history departments, where literary texts seem to provide a blissfully transparent understanding of history. In the end, the promise of cultural studies never materialized with regard to strong student interest and healthy enrollments in language departments.

I will not be evasive: I wholeheartedly agree with Sloan's defense of keeping *literature* as a distinctive marker of our discipline, and I concur with her belief that "the study of literature is inextricable from our mission to teach language and culture." As she explains, culture is intrinsically embedded in language and literature teaching; culture is a "continually constructed and negotiated site of the production of meaning."

Small Steps on the Path Forward

Multilanguage and individual-language departments face the same problem: how to better integrate all the components of our discipline (language, literature, linguistics, and culture) into a common departmental identity and into our curriculum and teaching practices.[6] Sloan maps the obstacles to a shared identity—lack of intradepartmental collaboration, language-literature bifurcation, and lack of recognition of curricular redesign and collaborative efforts toward tenure and promotion.

Indeed, there are institutional forces outside our control, but I believe departments can find spaces to enact meaningful changes that do not necessarily entail a name change. Leveraging ongoing assessment responsibilities to create a meaningful space for renewed collaboration and a catalyst for change can be a place to start.[7] Successful program redesign can be a daunting task, and grand programmatic narratives can be paralyzing when real-life pressures start to settle in. Therefore, I would like to articulate some suggestions from a more modest, humble view that perhaps can help departments enact consequential changes with small, practical, and gradual steps.

For change to occur, the department chair needs to be an academic leader who can guide the process in an inclusive and consensual manner to ensure that—as Sloan opines—literary specialists, applied linguists, sociolinguists, and second language acquisition specialists can work together. Every department member (tenured, tenure-track, and non-tenure-track) needs to have real ownership in this process, which ultimately is the most effective way to create a shared departmental identity. The department chair must be genuinely invested in this collective process and not create the illusion of a process to implement a unilaterally preconceived departmental project.[8] These conversations need to be separated from the mundane departmental meetings. A Friday brown-bag lunch might be conducive for valuable, nonhierarchical exchanges among colleagues, during which a conversation topic could focus on culture in the curriculum, drawing insights from each person's own teaching experience and pedagogical self-reflection. These types of activities are essential to build trust and consensus and to foster a sense of community and shared identity.

Regarding the place of culture in our curriculum, we must reevaluate how we embed culture in our classes. We often overlook that we are educating twenty-first-

century young adults who are active cultural consumers with unparalleled access to international films, television series, and music through streaming platforms and social media. The old times of the language teacher as pseudosociocultural animator or country ambassador are long gone. (My students laugh when I tell them my literary course will be cutting-edge, given its complete absence of *YouTube* clips and visual media. Students are relieved there are not a plethora of clips to watch.) Our students have grown up with digital media coming at them from all angles. This is one of the reasons I think giving literature center stage can afford students with more meaningful engagements with world cultures, which differ from those cultures readily available outside the classroom. We must rediscover the fascinating enterprise of interpreting literary texts through close reading, which Peter Brooks views as the skill of "slow reading" because this type of reading "teaches us to bring our full attention to what is before us on the page, to explore its ways of *making meaning* as well as what we may ultimately see as its messages" (22).[9] Indeed, slow reading is a fitting name for the type of work we do in the world language and world literature classroom.

Departments must discuss and implement strategies to avoid language-literature bifurcation to deepen and strengthen a unified curriculum across the entire course sequence. The challenge is how to create a linguistic and pedagogical continuum beginning at the elementary language level and culminating in the most advanced courses and seminars. Agreeing on succinct and achievable learning goals is a basic prerequisite.

Assessment initiatives can be a launching pad for attainable, practical changes. This point cannot be repeated often enough. Last year, for our yearly report on direct assessment, I suggested that my department focus on writing skills, comparing final essays written by Spanish majors with those composed by students in the fourth-semester class of our language sequence.[10] We found that our students, like most second language speakers, have greater rhetorical and organizational skills than monolingual students do. The majors showcased their ability to explain complex interpretative topics and to present and support opinions by developing persuasive arguments. Nonetheless their control of grammar and syntax, of cohesive devices, and of punctuation was sometimes lacking, requiring many prompts and corrections by professors. On the other hand, fourth-semester language student samples displayed evidence of better self-monitoring and error control, and this can be explained by the context of writing: we sampled a high-intermediate language course where careful attention is given to the structure of the Spanish language.[11] This exercise persuaded us that there is a need to give more emphasis to Spanish writing in our upper-division literary courses so students can develop better self-monitoring techniques. In these courses, multimodal use of the Spanish language needs to be better integrated with critical thinking, literary analysis, and development of academic literacy. Clearly, this goal cannot be relegated solely to language and writing courses, and this perfectly matches Sloan's refreshing recommendation: "Continued feedback on accuracy, rhetoric, and critical and analytical expression of thought are essential if we are to educate students to be viable participants in a global society."

The most recent language textbooks (at least in Spanish) are shifting away from the communicative approach to teaching language in favor of a multimodal approach to language learning, including assigning literary readings appropriate to each reading proficiency level.[12] Communicative language teaching is mainly associated with interactive and transactional oral language production, but, as Sloan argues, undergraduate literary studies require analysis and critical evaluation of literary and cultural information and the ability to use persuasive and hypothetical discourse to develop well-articulated interpretations. With this in mind, students in our fourth-semester class are required to read, by the end of the semester, one of Antonio Buero Vallejo's stage plays or one of Gabriel García Márquez's short novels. This has been one of the most consequential changes we have made to our language curriculum to avoid the propensity to separate language instruction from literary-cultural content. We moved students from doing repetitive communicative activities to producing a meaningful and challenging short essay that showcases their linguistic competence and better integrates the language content studied throughout the semester. Literature becomes a gateway to language learning and vice versa.[13] In this regard, Janet Swaffar and Katherine Arens make a compelling case for giving renewed attention to literature as an integral tool for language learning and cultural competency:

> Increasingly, FL [foreign language] acquisition research suggests that literature is the necessary textual environment for creating strong readers, readers who have the cognitive strategies and linguistic resources to comprehend and interpret a work as well as an aesthetic object as a complicated act of communication within a culture. (qtd. in Paesani 162)

Envisioning a Better Future

Coming back to the name-change debate, world language faculty members also need to engage their students as active participants in these academic processes, from departmental name changes to curriculum redesign. We must also ask ourselves, What do students call us? While I have tried to highlight the divorce between graduate programs and undergraduate institutions, by the same token, two- and four-year institutions must build strong bridges with our surrounding school districts and become acquainted with the realities of world languages in secondary education. We must have a thorough understanding of the type of language-literature education our students had in high school. Our students are not blank slates. We must withhold judgment and operate from a point of curiosity: What literary books have they read?[14] What are their ideas about college-level language education, and how do these ideas compare to their high school experiences?[15] We must understand and acknowledge students' needs and aims.[16] Last year I asked students in my seminar on Jorge Luis Borges why they were taking the class. Most of them replied that their main goal was to enhance their Spanish language proficiency. By the end of the semester, although they were mesmerized by Borges's complex and fascinating short stories, I could not deny the centrality of language learning and their desire to master the language.

To conclude, departmental name changes might signal a change in focus, mission, and hiring. This is why name changes demand serious and careful reflection grounded in intellectual rigor. A name change by itself will not magically improve the situation of the humanities and the liberal arts. What do we call ourselves? Perhaps, first, we need to know who we really are as teacher-scholars and then reflect on our pursuits for change based on our academic training, circumstances, time, and institutional resources, also factoring in student needs.

I unapologetically believe in the centrality of language and literature and the imperative need to combine the practical aspects of second language literacy with the meaningful dimensions that emerge when we engage in the humbling experience of interpreting literary texts and writing in another language about those texts. We can do this using innovative, interdisciplinary approaches to language-literature education without resorting either to the exclusionary and homogenizing practices of old literary criticism or the failed methods in world language teaching. The Argentine Canadian writer Alberto Manguel inspires us to envisage a better future by reflecting eloquently on the transformative aspects of reading literature: “I believe there is an ethic of reading, a responsibility in how we read, a commitment that is both political and private in the act of turning the pages and following the lines. And I believe that sometimes, beyond the author’s intentions and beyond the reader’s hopes, a book can make us better and wiser” (x).

Notes

1. The MLA no longer issues reports on “foreign language enrollments,” opting for “enrollments in languages other than English.” See Jaschik for an account of this trend.

2. Within my subfield, I can think of Columbia’s Department of Latin American and Iberian Cultures; Stanford’s Department of Iberian and Latin American Cultures; and the Department of Hispanic Studies at Brown, Texas A&M University, and the University of California, Riverside, among others. See Stanton for an analysis in favor of *studies* as a replacement for *languages and literatures*.

3. I am a professor at Swarthmore College, a small liberal arts college, where I teach a wide range of Spanish language and literature courses through an interdisciplinary lens and where I served as section head, interdisciplinary program coordinator, and department chair. At my institution, the Spanish program branched off from the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures in 2019 to form a separate department. To successfully branch off on our own, it took my colleagues and me more than a decade of work on “improving learning goals and assessment, honing the structure of the curriculum, finding smarter models of teaching intensive Spanish language courses” (Dougherty). To avoid confusions with interdisciplinary programs—who use the *studies* nomenclature (e.g., Latin American and Latino studies)—we opted for a neutral name and decided to simply call ourselves the Department of Spanish. This was also in line with existing Spanish departments in our tricollege consortium with Haverford and Bryn Mawr. It was important to us to have a department name and identity that was easily understandable and accessible to current and prospective students.

4. I follow the nomenclatures presented by Javier Muñoz-Basols, Elisa Gironzetti, and Manel Lacorte, who do not conflate *second language* with *foreign language* (Muñoz-Basols et al. 2).

5. In other cases, the cultural or literary topics studied in graduate school do not lend themselves easily to undergraduate teaching, where students’ interests point in a different direction based on what they read in high school. The College Board’s AP Spanish Literature and Culture exam, for example, has tremendous influence in shaping student interest in specific Iberian and Latin American writers.

6. The ability to work together is also predicated on a delicate balance between autonomy and unity. Marie-Pierre Le Hir sums it up brilliantly: “It is possible to have it both ways, to be autonomous in research and in the classroom while at the same time working together to improve the conditions and circumstances of the group and for the benefit of students” (37).

7. When carefully designed, outcomes-assessment initiatives, Le Hir argues, can improve not only student learning but also departmental objectives. On an intellectual level, engaging in the account-

ability debate is a good exercise in self-reflexivity: outcomes assessment provides a department with an opportunity (and a justification) for asking questions that are usually not raised at the departmental level. On a practical level, the mundane task of developing and implementing an outcomes-assessment plan can create faculty unity and help overcome divisions that are inscribed in the very nature of our disciplines (28).

8. In my opinion, summer seminars from the MLA Academic Programs Services (ADE and ADFL) are a vital tool for chairs to get acquainted with best practices, trends, and challenges.

9. I am also reminded of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reflections about comparative literature, which remind us about the importance of reading closely in the original: "We must take the language of the Southern Hemisphere as active cultural media rather than as objects of cultural study by the sanctioned ignorance of the metropolitan migrant" (9).

10. My source of inspiration was a discussion group on how to overcome language-literature bifurcation presented by Stacey Katz Bourns and Luciana Fellin at the 2021 MAPS (ADE and ADFL) Leadership Institute.

11. For a definition of *context of writing*, see Archibald and Jeffery.

12. According to Kate Paesani, "[M]ultimodal language development places equal importance on oral and written language and interpretative interaction with literature to construct textual meaning and establish form-meaning connections" (161).

13. In subsequent semesters, we aim to fine-tune the presentation of these literary texts, giving students more time for class discussions. We plan to develop reading guides to help students with their analysis and interpretation. Our new textbook in our third-semester class includes a good repertoire of short literary texts that we plan to highlight more adequately. These activities have a dual purpose: the development of oral fluency and close-reading skills in Spanish.

14. For my survey course on Latin American literature, I created an online *Moodle* survey to better understand my students' reader profiles.

15. I cannot underscore enough the issue of equitable access to world language education in high schools across the United States. I have collaborated with the College Board, and I serve in the Greater Philadelphia chapter of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese with colleagues who are high school teachers. I am deeply aware of the barriers that restrict access to world language courses for students from certain ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups who attend public, urban schools and who have been traditionally underserved.

16. My involvement with the AP Spanish Literature and Culture exam led me to understand that many of my students have already read and enjoyed short stories by canonical Latin American authors such as Horacio Quiroga, Juan Rulfo, Carlos Fuentes, and Gabriel García Márquez. This is why many first-year students told me they wish to attain enough Spanish language proficiency to be able to read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in the Spanish original. With this understanding in mind, I developed a successful advanced course called García Márquez y su huella ("García Márquez and His Traces") to examine the author's seminal novel and present a new generation of Colombian female and male writers.

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