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Perspectives

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A sign of the times



Bryan Dixon Emerald

¿H ablas Español? Parlez-vous Français? Parli Italiano?
Ever wanted to learn a second language? Anyone who has ever wanted to do so at the University has had numerous options and could easily enroll in any of the countless classes offered, which range from Spanish to Swedish to Hebrew. But while any of these classic tongues of the world is accepted as the foreign language requirement some may need to graduate, one language remains to be recognized as a valid one to fulfill the requirement. This form of communication doesn't involve any oral speaking, but it's definitely a way to say something.

Someone finally formally raised the question of why it's missing from the list of languages that can be used to fulfill the foreign language requirement: Currently, the ASUO plans to present a proposal to the University Senate to include American Sign Language as a foreign language option.

Great idea. In fact, you have to wonder why such a plan hasn't been put into effect already. How is it that a class with the word language in its title doesn't deserve to be seen as just that — a language? Seems like a matter of logic to me.

Sign language, the third most widely used language in the country, is the only American visual language that exists. Why should it be considered of any less value than any other language just because it has a different label? Aside from the fact that sign has its own complex syntax, grammar and vocabulary different from the English language, the deaf community has its own culture and history that is just as rich and valid as any other.

One of the apparent reasons sign hasn't been accepted on an equal level with other languages has been the lack of recognition of that cultural history and literature.

"Culture is difficult to define. It is not in this instance referring to clothes, food, etc.," said Johanna Larson-Muhr, the University adjunct professor of American Sign Language. "But [the deaf] have a different perspective and world view that in essence, along with different grammar and vocabulary indicates that there's a cultural difference."

When outsiders step into a foreign world, they must not only know the language but must understand the culture also to best communicate with the other group. Every culture has its own values and sensitivities that strangers must learn in order to avoid actions that could be found offensive or rude, although such actions may appear meaningless to them. Isn't this part of what learning another language is all about?

For example, one thing to respect in the deaf community is to never sign "excuse me" when passing two people in the middle of a conversation. It's considered an impolite interruption in contrast to other cultures that see it as a polite manner. Keeping eye contact at all times when talking to a deaf person is also very important in the culture. Just as one who takes Spanish will know how to interact appropriately with people in Spain, one who takes sign language will know the dos and don'ts of communicating with the deaf.

Besides such aspects, ASL's culture also includes literature that many may not realize exists. There's film, poetry and plays written in and for ASL. It's been proven and researched by linguists as having all the elements of a language — still the University hasn't accepted it.

"There's a lot of misinformation and ignorance about ASL," Larson-Muhr said. "But it is and has been recognized as a language and as having no relation to English by so many important institutions, and I think the University should also give recognition where recognition is due."

Not recognizing ASL degrades a significant population's language, which goes against everything for which the University stands. The University has always emphasized the importance of diversity and learning of other cultures, so here's a perfect opportunity to follow its goal. More than 90 other universities and colleges count ASL as a foreign language. The University should take this as a sign to give the language the recognition it's entitled to.

Beata Mostafavi is a columnist for the Emerald. Her views do not necessarily represent those of the paper. She can be reached via e-mail at bmostafa@gladstone.uoregon.edu.



Beata Mostafavi

Calling all brides and grooms

Planning a spring or summer wedding? The Emerald is seeking out University students, faculty or staff to offer anecdotes and information about the process, with stories to run in a Jan. 25 bridal supplement. Please call the Emerald office, 346-5511, and leave a message — with phone number and best time to reach you — for supplement editor Jack Clifford.

EDITORIAL ROUND-UP

Americans uncomfortable with the concept of evil

By Mary C. Curtis
Knight-Ridder Newspapers

So the tapes from Columbine have been released, and everyone knows what the killers wanted, what they were thinking, whom they wanted to punish and impress. And you know what? We still can't make sense of it.

The killers hated everyone, just for being. They wanted fame. They quoted Shakespeare and planned — carefully and painstakingly. They wanted to kill.

Some people have reacted with disgust at the police and the press for even releasing their evil thoughts and shallow desires. While I agree that the parents of the victims should have been the first to see the tapes, I am glad the tapes were made public. Maybe now people will stop making the victims somehow complicit in

their own murders.

Remember right after Columbine? Everyone immediately tried to explain: How could this happen, and most especially, why?

It seems to be the first question people ask when something unexplainable happens.

When it came out that the two boys hated jocks, some had an a-ha moment. "They hated jocks; they were picked on by jocks; they were driven to it." In finding a reason, reason itself was discarded.

In reality, students described the killers as more bullies than bullied. One of these "loners" took a date to the prom. These "jock haters" carried on their killing spree in the cafeteria and library, not the gym or weight room.

And the victims themselves were really the ones working against the odds. They included

an undersized, sickly boy who fought back to become an athlete, a once-lost soul who found redemption, a shy child who joined debate for confidence — a baker's dozen of talented, loving and loved individuals. What did they do to deserve their fate? Nothing, absolutely nothing.

Hollywood rebels reinvigorating movie industry

By Philip Wuntch
Knight Ridder Newspapers

Welcome to the era of cynical cinema. We applaud its presence, even while pondering how long it will last.

Skepticism is the birthright of artists, whether of screen, stage or printed page. And in the 20th century's final year, the force born of discontent energized American film for the first time in 30 years. "American Beauty," "Magnolia," "Cradle Will Rock," "The Insider" and "The Hurricane" reflect the sense of right-

eous indignation that fueled some of the best American movies of the past.

The last great golden age of American cinema occurred during the late '60s and early '70s, when national unrest reached a stormy peak unmatched since Civil War days. Political turmoil nurtured creative fury, but Bill Clinton's Zippergate never registered a government fallout similar to Richard Nixon's Watergate. Political disillusionment may be a factor in the current resurgence but only a minor one.

Disillusionment with formula is a more immediate cause for this winter of discontent. It's a reasonably safe assumption that even the most prosaic filmmaker dreams of startling both audiences and critics. Yet much of the past two decades' film making was keyed to special-effects formulas. Either we were advised to love our alien brethren or kill those drippy creatures from outer

space. We were encouraged to either understand terrorists or destroy them. And if older teens, we were told to hurry up and get laid.

Doubts, skepticism, cynicism, rebellion. By whatever label, these traits have fostered any era's most supreme artistic achievements. They're with us again, and let's appreciate them while they last. In the shaky Hollywood union of artistry and commerce, a rebellious filmmaker may soon be treated like an unwanted child.

But there's always hope. After hearing that his film received six Golden Globe nominations, "American Beauty" director Sam Mendes told the Los Angeles Times that he hoped to prove that "a story is the only special effect that will never go out of fashion."

Long live rebellion.

College Press Exchange