

August 20, 2004

President Aram Chobanian
Boston University
Office of the President
One Sherborn Street
Boston, MA 02215

Dean Jeffrey Henderson
Boston University
College of Arts and Sciences
725 Commonwealth Ave.
Boston, MA 02215

Dear President Chobanian and Dean Henderson,

With this letter, I wish to endorse the proposal at Boston University that competency in American Sign Language be accepted as satisfying the college's foreign language requirement. My knowledge of ASL, and of the social, cultural, and artistic world of deaf signers, comes as a doctoral student in linguistic anthropology at the University of Chicago, for which I have conducted several years of intensive field research focusing on ASL literary forms and other deaf creative expression. I will apply this experience here to the views expressed in Prof. Jacobson's and Dean Berkey's 1994 letters (letters explaining BU's rejection of the proposal at that time), and also question the logic of those views.

In Prof. Jacobson's 1994 letter, he states that "the entire meaning and purpose" of the college's foreign language requirement would have to be reconsidered for ASL to be regarded as an appropriate option for students. The principal justification for this claim is that ASL, in the Academic Policy Committee's view, is not a foreign language, since its speakers are "an integral part of our society." They are not "a foreign *people*," the letter states, "in a geographic and ethnic sense." They come from "a variety of geographic and ethnic subgroups." What suspect alliances BU seems to recruit in this formulation. In a few words, and in the name of liberal arts education, it seems to turn back our understanding of the world's peoples to a pre-social-scientific age, to the rise of ethnolinguistic nationalism. It is as if committee members had not read Weber's thorough dismissal of "ethnicity" as an analytical category ("the concept of 'ethnic group' dissolves if we define our terms exactly" [1922]),¹ or were unaware of the thrust of Boasian anthropology (against the prevailing eugenic science of the time): that "race," "language," and "culture" (1940)² have no intrinsic relation to one another. Were BU to wish its students to hold tightly to their common-sense notions of ethnicity and peoplehood, one could scarcely suggest better reading than the committee's essentialization of language, ethnicity, and territory.

¹ Weber, Max. 1997 [1922]. What is an ethnic group? IN *The ethnicity reader: nationalism, multiculturalism, and migration*. (Eds.) Guibernau, Montserrat and John Rex. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

² Boas, Franz. 1940. *Race, language, and culture*. NYC: Macmillan.

But granting the formulation, a fundamental question that arises from it is whether the meaning and purpose of an undergraduate foreign language requirement should have nothing to do with individuals who constitute an integral part of our society—or, to the contrary, whether the prospect of such interaction might well be considered a primary aim. The prevalence of Spanish speakers in the United States, for example, is regularly given as a recommendation for learning Spanish. Certainly this will not seem alien to “the entire meaning and purpose” of a foreign language requirement. And certainly Spanish speakers are more integral to the U.S. infrastructure than deaf signers.

Or is it that these particular Spanish speakers’ perspectives are simply unimportant vis-à-vis the goals of foreign language instruction? Should only the “rich histories and traditions” (“the history, literature and culture”) of these speakers’ ancestors be central to our thinking—as Prof. Jacobson’s and Dean Berkey’s letters foreground to the exclusion of all other motivations for learning a language?

Indeed, if it is rich and important history that one is after, I recommend Douglas Baynton’s cultural history, *Forbidden Signs* (1996),³ which uses deaf education as a lens through which to examine ideological shifts over several centuries. Baynton shows, for example, that turn-of-the-century American nationalism led to criticism of sign language on the grounds of it being a foreign language, creating a distinct foreign element within our society—seemingly antithetical to the 1994 APC’s view. Baynton further shows that sexist assessments of female intelligence at the turn of the century (suiting women, in this view, for non-abstract repetitive tasks), worked in concert with lower wages demanded by women and the greater number of teachers required in oral-based deaf education, to transform deaf education from a male-taught to a female-taught industry. Manual-based deaf education, dominated by men, had been championed by intellectuals until the rise of evolutionary thinking in the mid-19th century. Other historical studies of the deaf reveal, among many other points, sterilization campaigns carried out against the deaf in several U.S. states and abroad.

One, thus, can only take issue with the claim of Dean Berkey’s 1994 letter that, “at best,” students of ASL can attain an “increased understanding of a subculture of the American industrial society.” The phenomena just cited go well beyond the deaf, and well beyond American industrial society, and are of considerable moment to a range of disciplines. Anyone familiar with deaf signing society is also aware that signers are oriented to one another cross-territorially—across state and national boundaries. When signers speak of “The Deaf World,” they mean just that. Indeed, the deaf cultural community achieves its ideal realization in cross-territorial gatherings, which take place on an international level regularly. Signers do not speak of a “homeland,” but rather speak of being “home” when they are in the presence of large numbers of deaf signers, regardless of their origins. These matters, of key theoretical interest to the humanities and social sciences, were perhaps not brought to the attention of the 1994 committee.

³ Baynton, Douglas C. 1996. *Forbidden signs: American culture and the campaign against sign language*. Chicago: U Chicago.

Perhaps it will be objected that, though these issues are academically important, nonetheless, they are not confined to a bounded world of deaf signers making their own history entirely on their own, and this, unfortunately, can only disqualify such events as valid discussion topics in a truly foreign language class, where all matters must be foreign “in a geographic and ethnic sense.” Students should study these issues, but elsewhere, it might be suggested. Such a view, however, would certainly conflict with my own undergraduate training in Spanish. In my second-year coursework, we were assigned the drama, *El Color de Nuestra Piel* (“The Color of Our Skin”), which foregrounds the favor shown a light-skinned son. Hardly a “rich tradition” of any Latin American country, this theme also cannot be understood without reference to an intersection of cultural, ethnic, and territorial groups.

But a better response to this argument is to emphasize what seems to be its single virtue: its uncanny ability to make a sow’s ear out of a silk purse. Vis-à-vis the goals of a liberal arts education, it takes precisely what is an asset in the study of ASL and makes it seem a shortcoming. This construal also applies at the practical level. Foreign language instructors are typically elated to have native speakers available for interaction with students. At my college, an Argentine student was hired and flown up from Buenos Aires for that purpose. But in the case of teaching ASL, it is now suddenly a drawback that students can interact with native speakers in an ongoing way.

In considering the “foreign language” requirement, as Prof. Jacobson puts it (“with an emphasis on ‘foreign,’””), two overarching questions should be asked. First, if the entire meaning and purpose of studying a foreign language is to learn about a foreign people, *why is this so?* Why learn about a foreign people? And, second: is it *really* the case that a foreign language requirement is mostly about studying a foreign people? Does not learning a foreign grammatical system have more of a claim to importance? Indeed, Prof. Jacobson’s letter undergoes a transformation on this point: at first, it is asserted that the requirement is not “just” about language; but, by the letter’s end, the “language” component has been so de-emphasized as to seem entirely superfluous to the APC’s asserted goals. Let me address both of these overarching questions in turn.

Prof. Jacobson states that the philosophy behind BU’s foreign language requirement has to do with appreciating the history, culture, and literature of another people. Of course, it is conceivable that “appreciation” is intended here in the sense of celebration or respect; but it is clear that we would not celebrate every aspect of a foreign people’s ways (as just pointed out). What I take Prof. Jacobson to mean, rather, is that it is simply good for students to learn about portions of the world previously unknown to them—to assimilate this information for the sake of the information itself, in all its complexity, and now with the added access provided by the language.

Of course, it is good to respect, and it is good to be savvy. But, as a student of anthropology committed to the value of studying the ways of foreign peoples, I do not believe that these are the deepest goals of such studies. Anthropological study does not take

“another people” as the endpoint of the pursuit, but rather embarks on understanding another way of life, in its own terms, as the method by which students can gain a critical understanding of their own assumptions and values. One tries to appreciate the *systemic nature* of another way of life so as to see the same types of interdependencies between values and practices and major institutions in one’s own life.

If this is the case, then, far from the study of the deaf signing community “falling short” of the goals of a foreign language requirement in this regard, it might well be said that it excels. The study of deaf signers, as a disenfranchised linguistic minority, puts values, practices, and whole institutions of Western society directly into question. Such issues can be highlighted by studies of non-Western societies having different conceptions of personhood and ideal social participation, but they can, with far more force, be highlighted by studying the society of deaf signers which, in its own nature, exists in critical relation to many of our guiding assumptions. One cannot study ASL literature, for example, without confronting this logic in many dimensions, from the comic to the tragic.

On the other hand, perhaps the value of a foreign language requirement is most directly realized *not* through a student’s understanding of a different people. (After all, one can scarcely pursue this in two years of study, taken on in tandem with a variety of other course requirements.) Since a student’s effort in the first two years is taken up almost entirely with learning the phonological, grammatical, and discursive regularities of a language, it seems possible that the greatest benefit of foreign language study is the earnest encounter with the foreign linguistic system itself.

This is another Boasian point. Language, among all socially-constructed systems, is the one which monolingual speakers are most likely to intuit as natural. Though speakers realize other languages exist, differences between them tend to be understood only at the level of vocabulary (i.e., “different words for the same things”). This is because the grammatical system of the speaker’s first language is not understood as such, but rather as a transparent means of relating “real things” of the world (designated by terms in the vocabulary) to one another. The insight of Boasian linguistics (or modern linguistics in general) is that the various grammatical systems of the world are not “given” by nature, but, to the contrary, function to construe the relationships of nature in distinct ways. This realization on the part of the student ideally constitutes a more general gestalt realization wherein his or her own habituated way of conceptualizing the world is seen as precisely that. The anthropological historian George Stocking (1968)⁴ considers this principle so fundamental to modern anthropology that he locates the latter’s beginning in Boas’s short article, “On alternating sounds,” published in 1889. In this article, Boas shows that mistaken views concerning American Indian phonological systems can be traced to the Western observer’s own native phonological system and its unrealized effects on perception.

It is the momentousness of this turn that the linguist John Goldsmith refers to in his *Handbook of Phonological Theory* (1995)⁵ when he states:

⁴ Stocking, George. 1968. *Race, culture, and evolution: essays in the history of anthropology*. NYC: Free Press.

⁵ Goldsmith, John. 1995. *The Handbook of Phonological Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

The study of signed languages, such as American Sign Language, promises to have a profound effect on phonological theory, and perhaps ultimately on our understanding of what a human language is. The possibilities that emerge from a linguistic system not constrained by the resources of the vocal tract exploit capacities that had until recently been hidden from linguists' view, and the broadened vista that we have today may in retrospect be as significant for the development of linguistics as was the impact on the Western tradition of the study of non-Indo-European languages.

If the founding principle of modern anthropological thought—the distinction of “etic” and “emic” description, and the culture-boundedness of perception—is understood to have some relation to the purpose of a foreign language requirement, then ASL does not “fall short,” but, in fact, far surpasses languages such as Spanish, French, and German in this respect, and perhaps all spoken languages. More so than any spoken language, ASL, in its manual phonological system, and its multidimensional grammatical system, forces a contemplation of our most basic ideas of language, and invites (if the student is so inclined) a critical interrogation of our most fundamental principles of linguistic theory.

A last objection by the 1994 committee is that since ASL may not satisfy graduate-level foreign language requirements, it follows that it should not satisfy BU's undergraduate requirement—since this would put BU students “at a distinct disadvantage” in graduate school. The most striking thing about this view is that it makes the purpose of an undergraduate education entirely subservient to that of a graduate education. Such a policy seems to have little regard for those students—presumably a majority—who choose not to enter graduate school. But the logic of the APC's formulation is equally disconcerting in a second respect. Because ASL may be discriminated against elsewhere—it seems to say—so too does Boston University affirm that it must discriminate against it here. In any case, it clearly does not follow that accepting ASL for the college's foreign language requirement would compromise students embarking on graduate study. Students considering graduate school need not pursue ASL for this purpose, and the college can easily apprise students of the concern. Meanwhile, there are an increasing number of departments that actively seek students with competence in ASL.

Dean Berkey summarizes the APC's motivations as following from “a clear and deeply held commitment to the principle that liberal arts education should provide students with broad-gauged insights into the cultures of the world, presented through history, literature, languages, religion, philosophy, and the arts.” One can only applaud such a pursuit, and meanwhile wonder at the manner of thinking required to reckon the study of ASL as falling short in it. Is the committee saying that students of second-year French will read philosophy in French? History in French? Even literature in French? Will they come to an understanding of—attain “broad-gauged insights” into—French religion, French art, French history? Let us hope that they come to an intermediate understanding of the French language. And, in so doing, they will have accomplished much, but certainly not *all*. Please don't imagine the whole universe of liberal arts aspirations to be answered by a two-year foreign language requirement. Arguing against this position is difficult; as difficult as is the position misconceived.

Like a student of second-year French, a student who attains competency in ASL has accomplished much. And it has been my aim to suggest that such a student may well gain more “broad-gauged insights” into the cultures of the world than his or her counterpart in 212 French. But Dean Berkey may have been considering what comes *after* the student’s two years of study in French—including years three and four into the mix, and thus into the meaning and purpose of the two-year requirement. Perhaps travel to France, as well. This may be what he means by calling foreign language instruction “enabling” (an interesting choice of words).

Ultimately, one must ask, “enabling for what?” Studying ASL is, indeed, quite enabling; but such an opinion depends, of course, on whether the part of the world it enables one to explore is understood as worth investigating, worth experiencing, worth learning from, worth engaging with—perhaps even in a professional capacity. I do not claim—nor does anyone else—that learning the complex and mind-blowing language of the deaf, and engaging with signing society, is everyone’s cup of tea. It’s not. *No problem*. But nor is learning Spanish, nor is learning French, nor is learning Swahili, nor is learning Hebrew or Greek. All of these studies are enabling—in particular ways, varying in each case—toward a student discovering his or her sense of purpose in the world, perhaps to set the experience aside after two years, perhaps to pursue it wholeheartedly in any number of ways.

In a recent MLA newsletter (wherein ASL is categorized with other foreign languages without qualification),⁶ it is asserted that “students are recognizing the importance of knowing more than one language, whether they choose to pursue a heritage language from their family background, a language spoken in the communities where they live, a classical language such as Latin or biblical Hebrew, or a widely spoken modern language that will serve them well in their careers.” This statement seems to recognize the “enabling” nature of studying another language not primarily in terms of appreciating foreign literature, but rather in terms of students’ involvement with speakers of another language—in the family, in the community, in their careers. Studying ASL, in fact, does not limit one’s interaction to the American deaf. Just as I have had Spanish conversations with Cubans and Peruvians, so too I have had conversations in ASL with Cubans, Peruvians, Colombians, Italians, Iranians, Ethiopians, Native Americans, Norwegians, and Taiwanese—all having learned this language, it being nearly an international lingua franca among the deaf. How many students of French can say that?

The notion that ASL “falls short” of other languages vis-à-vis the goals for Boston University’s foreign language requirement would seem to encourage the counter-argument that, in fact, ASL is “just the same as” other languages, and deaf culture is “just the same as” other cultures. It’s exactly as foreign, it’s exactly as isolated, it has exactly the same type of history, and the same types of literature, etc., etc., etc. But, indeed, this, besides being untrue, is an entirely retrograde perspective to take, missing the greatest potential that the study of ASL brings to students in their liberal arts education. ASL and deaf signers are not exactly the same as other languages and cultural groups; but far from this

⁶ Feal, Rosemary. 2004 (Spring). “More college students studying foreign languages than ever before.” *MLA newsletter*.

being a shortcoming, it should be seen as a great advantage to be capitalized upon. ASL courses will not—indeed, cannot—be exactly the same as French courses, but what harm is there in that? Is thinking outside the box taboo in a critically-oriented education? To the contrary, it is the very life-blood of it. ASL may not be for everyone, but for those who wish to take it on, it is a massive challenge, ideally pressing undergraduates to their limits.

If I can be of any assistance in your deliberation upon this matter, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Very sincerely yours,

Frank Bechter
Doctoral candidate
Dept. of Anthropology
University of Chicago
Chicago, IL 60637
fbechter@uchicago.edu

cc: Prof. Carol Neidle