2012 Humanities Department Writing Contest

Entry Form

Entry Submitted for (circle one)

Poetry

Freshman Essay

(Non-Fiction)

Fiction

Title of Entry "Eleven Words That Sound Like "Orange": What the Vietnamese Language Taught Me About Cultural Relativism"

NOTE: You must submit BOTH a paper copy AND a duplicate electronic copy in MS Word .DOC or .DOCX format to <iitwritingcontest@gmail.com>. The file name should be Lastname.Nonfiction.doc, Lastname.Poetry.doc, Lastname.Fiction.doc, or Lastname.Freshman.doc, depending on the category it is to be entered into.

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Eleven Words That Sound Like “Orange”:

What the Vietnamese Language Taught Me About Cultural Relativism

When I was seven I sat with my parents around a table while half a dozen adults puzzled over the Vietnamese word for "orange" − cam. The trouble was that just a few lessons ago our learn-Vietnamese-on-tape instructor had taught us − and we were very attentive students, unlikely to mess something like this up − the word for "thanks," and it sounded suspiciously like the word for "orange" we were now hearing.

The word for orange is indeed "cam," but the word for thanks is "cám", and to our unconditioned American-English ears the words sounded the same but in reality that little upward dash makes all the difference. It tells us that when the Vietnamese say thanks they say it with an upward tone that makes it sound like a question to our unconditioned American-English ears. My seven-year-old self asked, but then how do they know whether they're asking a question or saying thanks? until I realized that the Vietnamese have another way to ask questions, and that was my first lesson in cultural relativism.

That group of half a dozen adults soon gave up on sitting around that table listening attentively to our learn-Vietnamese-on-tape instructor because it ran up upon an insurmountable issue which was that the tapes we so attentively placed in cassette players were not of high enough quality to articulate the nuance of the Vietnamese language, and the nuance of the Vietnamese language is where most of its meaning derives. Where in English we string together prefixes and roots, piling on suffixes and conjugations and a wide array of various syllables that we have gleaned from the several languages from which ours has originated, the Vietnamese find their diversity of vocabulary in a much different place: they have more vowels, and they have tones.

The many vowels and many tones (ten vowels, six tones) are indicated on paper by what we call diacritics, which as an American English speaker I might see as letter ornamentation, because Vietnamese uses the Latin alphabet as its skeleton, giving a general idea of how any given word might be spoken, and its diacritics embellish words to tell us the difference between "orange" and "thanks". But orange and thanks are very different things, and letter ornamentation is only what it is called according to my unconditioned American-English ears, because without them in Vietnamese you are left with less than a skeleton, and nobody understands you. So what I call letter ornamentation is to the Vietnamese not merely ornamentation but an aspect of their language as important as any of its letters. The little upward dash is as important to Vietnamese as the letter J is to English. (Incidentally, the Vietnamese don't use the letter J.) So these are the nuances of the Vietnamese language, but when I say nuance I mean it is only nuance to our unconditioned American-English ears, because we do not know what to look for or how to look for it and even when we are looking for it we usually cannot find it.

Interestingly enough, the feeble less-than-skeleton of the Vietnamese language which is the Latin alphabet only plays that role because of the French colonization of Vietnam. (I say this: Vietnam; but I should tell you that the Vietnamese language is primarily monosyllabic, and the proper name for the nation is Việt Nam). Before this particular historical upheaval, they had their own system of writing called Chữ-nôm, adapted from the related Chinese script, which is the result of a whole other historical upheaval. The other legacy the French left, the one that I noticed at least, are baguettes. On the streets of Saigon it is very easy to find a vendor selling the Vietnamese sandwich, bánh mì, served on a torpedo baguette and towering with crisp greens. Some French words even took over for the Vietnamese ones that were their first names, or filled voids when they named things that didn't exist to the Vietnamese culture before. When I first learned that the Vietnamese name for coffee was "cà phê" (two words – both monosyllabic) I thought for sure that it would be easy to remember, if I ignored the embellishments, though there's no use in that.

The first time I ever spoke to my Vietnamese older sister, Nora, was on the phone and we passed through a series of English exchanges the way a tennis ball careens back and forth during a particularly good match. She had been taught at the orphanage how to ask her new American family "How are you?" and to say "Hello," and I don't remember what else (though there wasn't much) because, to be honest, language didn't do a whole lot for us then and the real communication in that particular conversation came through the thrill in her voice which was electrifying and exciting for me, because I was speaking to my sister. When we met at the airport as my father deplaned with the three newest members of our family, Nora and I embraced and then held hands and we did not let go until we got back to the house that night, and then we slept in the same bed for months even though the rooms that we would share for the rest of our childhoods almost always contained two.

My mother had prepared for my siblings' arrival by crowding the house with index cards labeling various items with their English names and I realized that the word for something was not an immutable portion of its identity, because for my siblings these words were entering the identities of these objects for the first time. She asked us all what we wanted for breakfast, pointing at things and saying their names, and I remember her holding up an orange and saying, "Orange? Cam? Do you want an orange to eat? *Cam?*" I wonder if she was really pinning her hopes on this being what they wanted for breakfast since, as far as I can recall, "cam" was one of the two Vietnamese words we knew. (The other was the word for water, "nước," which we knew because it was the only word my younger Vietnamese brother retained, and he used it to tell us he was thirsty.) I can't remember what it was they chose to have for breakfast that morning.

It took about six months of lessons in the basement with my three older Vietnamese siblings before my parents told friends and family that they were officially fluent in English. The three of them, my two brothers and sister, would pore over the Vietnamese-to-English lesson books with one of our parents, our Vietnamese-English dictionary on hand. Sometimes I wanted to help, but mostly these

lessons bored me, and I think by not participating I missed the chance to learn what the nuances of the English language were. They would not have been nuances to me, of course, because English was the language with which my thoughts and being were inextricably entwined, but I can imagine. It is, for example, tricky to understand that the two letters together “in” can both be the preposition as in, “in the basement,” and also the negating prefix that gives us “inextricable.” There are countless examples like this and for about six months my siblings untangled them as they studied those lesson books or read the index card taped to the “refrigerator” or taught me how to play a new and very complicated version of hopscotch, which I never won.

Once, when it had been years since those lessons in the basement, Nora and I argued over the way that I pronounced the word “singing” and it was true that I always had trouble when two velar nasal consonants (the international phonetic alphabet calls it ⟨ŋ⟩) found themselves in the same word. Nora was right and at that point it was understood that her thoughts and being were inextricably entwined with the English language the same way mine were. Later, in high school, I was the only person in my class capable of identifying the ⟨ŋ⟩ at the beginning of the Vietnamese surname “Nguyen” and attempt a correct pronunciation.

One day while we were children Nora was playing teacher, because at that time it was her most ardent desire to become a teacher, and for the full extent of our young attention spans she repeated Vietnamese words to me and I plundered through pronunciations my unconditioned American-English tongue could not form. Sometimes I could hear the difference when she said, for example, ma ("ghost") or má ("mother"), and I could always tell when she meant mã (sometimes "horse") because the broken *ngã* tone − which means "tumbling" and is indicated by a tilde − is the most encouragingly easy to recognize. Our lessons didn't take us very far, though. Years later, on our “homeland voyage” trip to Vietnam with most of my siblings, Nora taught me, painstakingly, to recite the numbers up to twelve or so, and I learned to say “hello” to the many significant people I met and “no” to the many rickshaw

peddlers that hoped I wouldn't want to walk and would pay in American dollars. Right now, in my head, I can remember one through seven, but I know enough to realize I'm not saying any of it right.

My older non-Vietnamese brother Weston stayed after the rest of us left that trip, and he learned Vietnamese while he taught English and managed a restaurant. It took him a very long time to find any sort of material that taught Vietnamese to English-speakers rather than the other way around, and every conversation began with him trying to convince his partner to let him practice Vietnamese rather than letting his partner practice English. He called us one day and over the crackling line recited two of the consonants he was just getting the hang of, one which sounded like a “t” and one which sounded like a “t” but perhaps was a bit shorter. I thought that my perpetually unconditioned American-English ears recognized the difference but maybe I was just pretending to myself. Weston practiced on the phone with my siblings and they remarked that perhaps American-English ears and tongues could, after all, become conditioned to recognize the nuances of the Vietnamese language.

The full list of Vietnamese words that use the “cam” backbone, as far as I have been able to find, are as follows:

cam *orange*, or *to suffer*
cám *to thank*, or *bran*
cảm *to feel*
cạm *trap*
căm *inwardly angry*
cằm *chin*
cắm *to drive into*
câm *dumb*
cầm *to hold*
cấm *to forbid*
cẩm *marble*

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