

ASSIGNMENT ON MOTIVATION

Instructions

This week's assignment is not due until Wednesday, December 1. Your task is to answer the questions on stimulus appraisal from the enclosed worksheets. Answer the questions about ONE event that caused you emotion, and then do the same for twelve events in the learners' biographies written by Eva Hoffman, Alice Kaplan, and Richard Watson.

STIMULUS APPRAISAL

Think back to an event that caused you emotion.

1. Novelty: Did you expect this event to occur?

Not at all	A little	Very much	Not applicable
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2. Intrinsic pleasantness: Did you find the event itself pleasant or unpleasant?

Pleasant	Neutral	Unpleasant	Not applicable
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3. Goal significance: How important was the event for your goals, needs, or desires at the time it happened? Did it help or hinder you to follow your plans or in achieving your goals?

It helped	It didn't matter	It hindered	Not applicable
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4. Coping potential: How did you evaluate your ability to act on or cope with the event and its consequences when you were first confronted with the situation?

I did not think that any action was necessary.
I believed that I could positively influence the event and change the consequences.
I believed that I could escape from the situation and avoid negative consequences.
I pretended that nothing important had happened and tried to think of something else.
I saw myself as powerless and dominated by the event and its consequences.

5a. Compatibility with external standards: If the event was caused by your own or someone else's behavior, would this behavior itself be judged improper or immoral by your acquaintances?

Not at all	A little	Very much	Not applicable
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5b. Compatibility with internal standards: How did this event affect your feelings about yourself, such as your self-esteem or your self-confidence?

Negatively	Not at all	Positively	Not applicable
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STIMULUS APPRAISAL

Consider events that are related in the learner biographies by Eva Hoffman, Alice Kaplan, and Richard Watson.

1. Novelty Did the author expect this event to occur?

Not at all	A little	Very much	Not applicable
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2. Intrinsic pleasantness Did the author find the event itself pleasant or unpleasant?

Pleasant	Neutral	Unpleasant	Not applicable
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3. Goal significance How important was the event for the author's goals, needs, or desires at the time it happened? Did it help or hinder the author to follow their plans or in achieving their goals?

It helped	It didn't matter	It hindered	Not applicable
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4. Coping potential How did the author evaluate their ability to act on or cope with the event and its consequences when they were first confronted with the situation?

The author did not think that any action was necessary.
The author believed that they could positively influence the event and change the consequences.
The author believed that they could escape from the situation and avoid negative consequences.
The author pretended that nothing important had happened and tried to think of something else.
The author saw themselves as powerless and dominated by the event and its consequences.

5a. Compatibility with external standards If the event was caused by the author's or someone else's behavior, would this behavior itself be judged improper or immoral by the author's acquaintances?

Not at all	A little	Very much	Not applicable
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5b. **Compatibility with internal standards** How did this event affect the author's feelings about themselves, such as their self-esteem or their self-confidence?

Negatively	Not at all	Positively	Not applicable
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Excerpts from Eva Hoffman. (1989). *Lost in translation: A life in a new language*. New York: Penguin Books.

When I come out on deck, I see a bit of a world that returned all of my sense of loss to me like a sudden punch in the stomach. . . . There is something about the sight that is ineffably and utterly different from the landscape I'm used to. . . . We seem to be in the middle of nowhere. (pp. 92–93)

To me these interiors seem oddly flat, devoid of imagination, ingenuous. The spaces are so plain, low-ceilinged, obvious. . . . The only rooms that really impress me are the bathroom and kitchen—both of them so shiny, polished, and full of unfamiliar, fabulously functional appliances that they remind me of interiors which we occasionally glimpsed in French or American movies, and which, in our bedraggled Poland, we couldn't distinguish from fantasy. (p. 102)

The twist in our names takes them a tiny distance from us—but it's a gap into which the infinite hobgoblin of abstraction enters. Our Polish names didn't refer to us; they were as surely us as our eyes or hands. These new appellations, which we ourselves can't yet pronounce, are not us. They are identification tags, disembodied signs pointing to objects that happen to be my sister and myself. We walk to our seats, into a roomful of unknown faces, with names that make us strange to ourselves. (p. 105)

The process, alas, works in reverse as well. When I see a river now, it is not shaped, assimilated by the word that accommodates it to the psyche—a word that makes a body of water a river rather than an uncontained element. The river before me remains a thing, absolutely other, absolutely unbending to the grasp of my mind.

When my friend Penny tells me that she's envious, or happy, or disappointed, I try laboriously to translate not from English to Polish but from the word back to its source, to the feeling from which it springs. Already, in that moment of strain, spontaneity of response is lost. And anyway, the translation doesn't work. I don't know how Penny feels when she talks about envy. The word hangs in a Platonic stratosphere, a vague prototype of all envy, so large, so all-encompassing that it might crush me—as might disappointment or happiness. (pp. 106–107)

My shoulders stoop, I nod frantically to indicate my agreement with others, I smile sweetly at people to show that I mean well, and my chest recedes inward so that I don't take up too much space—mannerism of a marginal, off-centered person who wants both to be taken in and to fend off the threatening others. (p. 110)

a pretend teenager among the real stuff. There's too much in this car I don't like; I don't like the blue eye shadow on Cindy's eyelids, or the grease on Chuck's hair, or the way the car zooms off with a screech and then slows down as everyone plays we're-afraid-of-the-policeman. I don't like the way they laugh. I don't care for their "ugly" jokes, or their five-hundred-pound canary jokes, or their pickle jokes, or their elephant jokes either. And the most of all, I hate having to pretend. (pp. 118-119)

It's as important to me to speak well as to play a piece of music without mistakes. Hearing English distorted grates on me like chalk screeching on a blackboard, like all things botched and badly done, like all forms of gracelessness. The odd thing is that I know what is correct, fluent, good, long before I can, execute it. The English spoken by our Polish acquaintances strike me as jagged and thick, and I know that I shouldn't imitate it. I'm turned off by the intonations I hear on the TV sitcoms—by the expectation of laughter, like a dog's tail wagging in supplication, built into the actors' pauses, and by the curtailed, cutoff rhythms. I like the way Penny speaks, with an easy flow and a pleasure in giving words a fleshy fullness; I like what I hear in some movies; and once the Old Vic comes to Vancouver to perform Macbeth, and though I can hardly understand the particular words, I am riveted by the tones of sureness and command that mold the actors' speech into such majestic periods.

Sociolinguists might say that I receive these language messages as class signals, that I associate the sounds of correctness with the social status of the speaker. In part, this is undoubtedly true. The class-linked notion that I transfer wholesale from Poland is that belonging to a "better" class of people is absolutely dependent on speaking a "better" language. And in my situation especially, I know that language will be a crucial instrument, that I can over-come the stigma of my marginality, the weight of presumption against me, only if the reassuringly right sounds come out of my mouth. (pp. 122–123)

As I listen to people speaking that foreign tongue, English, I can hear when they stumble or repeat the same phrases too many times, when their sentences trail aimlessly—or, on the contrary, when their phrases have vigor and roundness, when they have the space and the breath to give a flourish at the end of a sentence, or make just the right pause before coming to a dramatic point. I can tell, in other words, the degree of their ease or disease, the extent of authority that shapes the rhythms of their speech. That authority—in whatever dialect, in whatever variant of the mainstream language—seems to me to be something we all desire. It's not that we all want to speak the King's English, but whether we speak Appalachian or Harlem English, or Cockney, or Jamaican Creole, we want to be at home in our tongue. We want to be able to give voice accurately and fully to ourselves and our sense of the world. (pp. -124)

At this point in my initiation into the English language, I have an active vocabulary of about six hundred words, it doesn't occur to me that I should mince any of them. I want to tell Canadians about how boring they are. "Canada is the dullest country in the world," I write in the notes for my speech, "because it is the most conformist." People may pretend to have liberal beliefs, I go on, but really they are an unadventurous lot who never dare to sidestep bourgeois conventions. With the hauteur that can only spring from fourteen-year-old innocence, I take these observations to be self-evident, because they are mine. (p. 133)

I learn also that certain kinds of truth are impolite. One shouldn't criticize the person one is with, at least not directly. You shouldn't say, "You are wrong about that"—though you may say, "On the other hand, there is that to consider." You shouldn't say, "This doesn't look good on you," though you may say, "I like you better in that other outfit." I learn to tone down my sharpness, to do a more careful conversational minuet. (p. 146)

I know how unprotected my family has become; I know I'd better do well—or else. The “or else” takes many forms in my mind—vague images of helplessness and restriction and always being poor. “The Bowery,” I come to call this congeries of anxieties. The Bowery is where I'll end up if I don't do everything exactly right. I have to make myself a steel breastplate of achievement and good grades, so that I'll be able to get out—and get in, so that I can gain entry into the social system from where I stand, on a precarious ledge. I am pervaded by a new knowledge that I have to fend for myself, and it pushes me on with something besides my old curiosity, or even simple competitiveness... .

I too am goaded on by the forked whip of ambition and fear, and I derive a strange strength—a ferocity, a puissance—from the sense of my responsibility, the sense that survival is in my own hands. (p. 157)

“Form is content,” at this time, is taken to mean that there is no such thing as content.

Luckily for me, there is no world outside the text; luckily, for I know so little of the world to which the literature I read refers. My task, when I read a poem or a novel, is to find repeated symbols, patterns of words, recurring motifs, and motifs that pull against each other. These last are particularly prized because they have the honorific status of “irony” and “paradox.” These are exercises I perform with ease... .

I became an expert on this business of symbolic patterns. (p. 182)

Eva also reports that

in a democratic education system, in a democratic ideology of reading, I am never made to feel that I'm an outsider poaching on others' property. In this country of learning, I'm welcomed on equal terms, and it's through the democratizing power of literature that I begin to feel at home in America, even before I understand the literature or America, or the relationship between them, very well. (pp. 183-184)

I've become obsessed with words. I gather them, put them away like a squirrel saving nuts for winter, swallow them and hunger for more. If I take in enough, then maybe I can incorporate the language, make it part of my psyche and my body. I will not leave an image unworded, will not let anything cross my mind till I find the right phrase to pin the shadow down. (p. 216)

The thought that there are parts of the language I'm missing can induce a small panic in me, as if such gaps were missing parts of the world or my mind—as if the totality of the world and mind were coeval with the totality of the language. Or rather, as if language were an enormous, fine net in which reality is contained—and if there are holes in it, then a bit of reality can escape, cease to exist. When I write, I want to use every word in the lexicon, to accumulate a thickness and weight of words so that they yield the specific gravity of things. I want to re-create, from the discrete particles of words, that wholeness of a childhood language that had no words.

I pounce on bits of colloquial idiom, those slivers of Americana in which the cultural sensibility is most vivid, as if they could give me America itself”. “Hair of the dog that bit

me,” I repeat to myself with relish; “pork-barreling”; “I’m from Missouri, show me”; “He swallowed it hook, line, and sinker.” When I speak, I’m awkward in using such homely familiarities; I still feel the presumption in it. But in writing, I claim territorial prerogative. Perhaps if I cast my net wide enough, it will cover the whole continent. (p. 217)

I sound natural enough, I sound like anybody else. But I can hear the artifice, and for a moment, I clutch. My throat tightens. Paralysis threatens. Speechlessness used to be one of the common symptoms of classic hysteria. I feel as though in me, hysteria is brought on by tongue-tied speechlessness. (p. 219)

Since I lack a voice of my own, the voices of others invade me as if I were a silent ventriloquist. They ricochet within me, carrying on conversations, lending me their modulations, intonations, rhythms. I do not yet possess them; they possess me. But some of them satisfy a need; some of them stick to my ribs. I could take on that stylish, ironic elongation which is X’s mark of perpetual amusement; it fits something in my temperament, I could learn to speak a part of myself through it. And that curtailed, deliberate dryness that Y uses as an antidote to sentiment opens a door into a certain New England sensibility whose richness I would never otherwise understand. Eventually, the voices enter me; by assuming them, I gradually make them mine. I am being remade, fragment by fragment, like a patchwork quilt; there are more colors in the world than I ever knew. (p. 220)

this is the most important thing: that it was in English, and that English spoke to me in a language that comes from below consciousness, a language as simple and mysterious as a medieval ballad, a gnostic speech that precedes and supersedes our analytic complexities... .

Perhaps I’ve read, written, eaten enough words so that English now flows in my bloodstream. But once this mutation takes place, once the language starts speaking itself to me from my cells, I stop being so stuck on it. Words are no longer spiky bits of hard matter, which refer only to themselves. They become, more and more, a transparent medium in which I live and which lives in me—a medium through which I can once again get to myself and to the world. (p. 243)

She further elaborates on her sense of mastery.

I’ve learned how to size people up; stepping into a room crowded with strangers, I can figure out quickly what species—public species, that is—the people in it belong to; I recognize that self-assured young man who peppers his international technocratic career with a few progressive ideas, that British academic who mutters hilarious remarks without bothering to change the pitch of his voice, that young poet whose posture is stiff with the strain of his sacrifice, that cosmopolitan Indian woman who has made the transition to modernity with evident grace. I’ve learned to read the signs and symbols governing the typology of the contemporary world.

I take great pleasure in these skills, and the sense of mastery they give me. But how fragile they seem as I step back into that first, most private kind of knowledge. (p. 251)

For me, therapy is partly translation therapy, the talk-cure a second-language cure. My going to a shrink is, among other things, a rite of initiation: initiation into language of the subculture within which I happen to live, into a way of explaining myself to myself. But gradually, it becomes a project of translating backward. The way to jump over my Great Divide is to crawl backward over it in English. It's only when I retell my whole story, back to the beginning, and from the beginning onward, in one language, that I can reconcile the voices within me with each other; it is only then that the person who judges the voices and tells the stories begins to emerge. (p. 271-272)

Excerpts from Alice Kaplan. (1993). *French lessons: A memoir*. University of Chicago Press.

After the death of Alice's father, her mother planned to take the family to live in France.

I imagined a house where we would be together near the water. . . . I can see myself there underneath a palm tree. I will be a French girl, like Madeline in the Madeline books who lives in an orphanage with other girls and walks in a straight line and gets a visit from Miss Clavel when she goes into the hospital with appendicitis. (p. 31)

Alice watches the funeral of President Kennedy on television.

The newscasters commented on the world leaders as they walked down Pennsylvania Avenue. De Gaulle, the president of France, floated over the rest. He wore a hat that reminded me of Abraham Lincoln's stovepipe hat, only shorter. Instead of a band all around it there was a visor in front that stuck out in line with his enormous nose. The newsmen commented on the special relationship of de Gaulle and Jacqueline Kennedy, who was able to speak to him in fluent French. (p. 32)

Alice remembers one of her first French teachers in Minnesota, Madame Holmgren.

She was a tired dowdy woman with very black hair, beige clothes, and an almost sickly pale skin punctuated by a mole.... [She] was an object of extreme fascination because of the hair on her legs—dark whiskery hair, the first hair any of us had ever seen on a grown woman's legs. (p. 126)

I knew what it was supposed to sound like. I heard Holmgren's "r." And I knew that by comparison our resistant "r" was a flat, closed-off smashed version of the truer sound. So let's say I did decide to risk it, make it ok, this foreign "r," I still had a dilemma: the American "r" sounded stupid, Midwestern, but to get the French one right I knew there would be an awkward apprenticeship where it would come out all slobbery and wrong. Like kissing a boy with braces on. (p. 128)

Alice remembers the time she spent in a Boarding School in Switzerland in the suburbs of Geneva.

Every morning those sounds woke me up. I understood more and more until I could anticipate the morning greeting of the Swiss news, and lip synch, word for word, the standard formulae. I got used to looking at people from a distance, trying to figure out what language they were speaking by the merest shadow of sound floating my way or by their gestures. I always had five or six new words on a personal in-progress list. Each time I heard one of the words on my list, I would notice the context and try to figure out the meaning. When I thought I had the meaning I would wait for the word to come up again, so I could check if my meaning was still right. Finally, I'd try the word out to see if a strange look came over the face of the person I was talking to. If it didn't, I knew I was home free. I had a new word.

I started thinking of my ear as something strong, and precious. I couldn't stand Chris's strutting and whispering, so when the girl in the room next door moved upstairs I moved into her old room, where everyone, a Palestinian and an Italian and a French girl, spoke French all of the time. I had to bottom bunk again, and I lay under the yellow and white striped covers and listened.

My ear was getting stronger and stronger. (pp. 47-48)

I look back at my handwriting from that year, in an assignment notebook that never got thrown out. It is small and round and perfect, no variation from letter to letter. Mostly what I have on record are conjugations. In basement study hall before breakfast I copied verb conjugations like a monk. I had a French Grammar book, Bled's Spelling, and I did extra exercises for the exceptions to the rules. I did this work the way someone would run a marathon, waiting to hit the wall at twenty miles, feeling the pain of the wall and running through it. I liked to work before breakfast. I thought I memorized better when my head was light. (p. 52)

I had come from a house where the patterns had broken down and the death that had broken them was not understood. Now I loved the loudspeaker and the study hall and the marble floor because they made me feel hard and controlled and patterned; the harder I felt the more I felt the sorrowful world behind me grow dim and fake and powerless. (p. 53)

I went into the village in search of French. I went to the train station. I bought tickets to Geneva, "aller et retour à Genève"—that is what you had to say to get a round trip ticket. I loved to let it roll off of my tongue, "alleretretour" in one drum roll, "to go and return." I bought tickets just to say it. Most of what I did, in town, I did in order to speak. Complicated conversations at the Tabac, the newsstand, the grocery. (p. 53)

Alice's American classmates at the Swiss boarding school had all grown up in a French-speaking country.

When called on, they spoke French effortlessly, but begrudgingly—"if you insist, if you insist . . ." I could practically hear it under their breath as they tossed off the sentence. They were bored, the students on the left-hand row, how could they be bored? Frichot, the teacher, calls on me. I feel as if I'm on a stage, the lights go down and the desks disappear. The spot is on me. I'm poised as I speak my lines from the play we're reading. (pp. 53-54)

Alice recalls learning the correct pronunciation of the French "r".

So that feeling of coming onto the "r" like a wall was part of feeling the essence of my American speech patterns in French, feeling them as foreign and awkward. I didn't know at the time how important it was to feel that American "r" like a big lump in my throat and to be dissatisfied about it. Feeling the lump was the first step, the prerequisite to getting rid of it. (p. 54)

I looked up at my teacher, M. Herve Frichot, former colonial school teacher from Madagascar. He had a goatee and glasses with thick black frames. He was a skeptic but he was looking at me now with deep respect. He hadn't thought I could do it. He said, "You've done it." He added: "Vowels next." But that was minor. I wasn't worried about the vowels because I knew that since I had gotten the "r," I had already started opening up my vowels. I could perfect them with the same method I had used for the "r": First feeling them wrong, like an impediment, feeling them again and again in their wrongness and then, one day, opening up and letting the right sound come. Relaxing. The "r" was the biggest hurdle; my system was now in place. (p. 55)

Alice recalls the way that she studied French in Switzerland.

That was what woke me up: absorbing a new reality, repeating it, describing it, appreciating it. I felt a pull toward learning I hadn't felt since the fifth grade: quiet mastery of a subject. Knowing I knew the material, that I had it down. Knowing how to find out more. Inventing methods for listening and making them habits. Feeling a kind of tickle in my ear at the pleasure of understanding. Then the pleasure of writing down what I had heard and getting every detail, every accent mark right.

The French have a verb for the kind of work I did at the Swiss school: *bossier*, which comes from a verb meaning "hunched" and means hunkering down to work, bending down over some precious matter and observing it. (pp. 55-56)

Alice returned home to Minnesota after a year in Switzerland.

In June I took the plane home. I could feel the French sticking in my throat, the new muscles in my mouth. I had my ear open, on the plane, for the sounds of anyone speaking French because those were my sounds now. I was full of French, it was holding me up, running through me, a voice in my head, a tickle in my ear, likely to be set off at any moment. A counter language. When I got off the plane the American English sounded loud and thudding-like an insult or lapse of faith. I would have to go hunting for French sounds, if I wanted to keep going. (p. 70)

Alice fell in love during her junior-year study abroad in Bordeaux.

I went to classes, part of our six-week orientation to French Culture. In class I spent a lot of time with my head on the desk, nothing but André in it. I went to language lab for phonetic testing and they said I was starting to get the regional Gascon accent in my "r"s, I should watch out. I had been studying André too hard. (p. 85)

This should have been my first clue that what I really wanted from André was language, but in the short run all it did was make me feel more attached to him, without knowing why I was attached. I can still hear the sound he made when he read my love letter: "T,t,t," with that little ticking sound French people make by putting the tips of their tongues on the roof of their mouths—a fussy, condescending sound, by way of saying, "that's not how one says it." What I wanted more than anything, more than André even, was to make those sounds, which were the true sounds of being French, and so even as he

was insulting me and discounting my passion with a vocabulary lesson, I was listening and studying and recording his response. (p. 86)

André tells Alice that he wants a woman he can express himself with. He says she understands his words but not his language.

That week I kept running over his speech in my mind. What was the difference between his words and my words, his world and my world? When I said a French word, why wasn't it the same as when he said one? What could I do to make it be the same? I had to stick it out with him, he was transmitting new words to me every day and I needed more. In fact, while Barbara and Buffy and Kacy (André dubbed us "l'équipe"—the team) rolled their eyes about what a raw deal I was getting from this creep, I was all the more determined to be with him. He was in all my daydreams now. I wanted to crawl into his skin, live in his body, be him. The words he used to talk to me, I wanted to use back. I wanted them to be my words. (pp. 87-88)

Alice becomes entranced when she reads "Voyage au bout de la nuit" (Journey to the End of the Night) by Louis-Ferdinand Céline.

What exquisite misery I felt! Disconnected, not belonging, desiring every house, imagining every happy scene behind every stone wall, taking in the lewd empty glances, given and received. Céline could express it all in a sentence through the sound of his words as much as their meaning. When reading him I luxuriated in despair, dark thoughts; and a commitment to eternal exile. (pp. 105-106)

That was only part of what drew me to Céline. The rest had to do with what happened while I was reading him, the music I felt in my heart, a sense of lightness and magic, as well as a total confidence in this writer's knowledge of the depths of individual human suffering. Our literature professor wanted us to hear that music.... (pp. 107-108)

Céline made me want to write. (p. 109)

After graduating with a Ph.D. from Yale, Alice's first job is teaching French at a state university in the South.

I had to teach first-year French to students who didn't want to be there but had to be, because it was a requirement. I went home every night and read the want ads just to know that there were jobs in the world other than the one I had. I saw French mistakes I had never even dreamed of—letters that didn't exist, words that bore no relation to any language. I graded and wept. (p. 165)

Alice reflects on life as a professor in a French Department at an American university.

French colleagues are invariably more generous in assessing the language skills of their American colleagues than we Americans are when we talk about each other ("Really, you know, her French isn't very good"). American French professors, they say, are much too self-conscious about petty details of linguistic performance, which have nothing to do with real intellectual life.

Easy for *them* to say: those details are our second identity. (p. 180)

Alice reflects on what learning French meant for her.

Learning French was connected to my father, because French made me absent the way he was absent, and it made me an expert the way he was an expert. French was also a response to my adolescence, a discipline to cover up the changes in my body I wanted to hide. (pp. 203-204)

Why do people want to adopt another culture? Because there's something in their own they don't like, that doesn't *name them*. (p. 209)

When I was an adolescent, French was my storehouse language. I collected secrets in French; I spoke to myself in French. I know now that my passion for French helped me put off what I needed to say, in English, to the people around me. (p. 214)

Why did I hide in French? If life got too messy, I could take off into my second world. Writing about it has made me air my suspicions, my anger, my longing, to people for whom it's come as a total surprise. There was a time when I even spoke in a different register in French—higher and excited, I was sliding up to those high notes in some kind of a hyped-up theatrical world of my own making. (p. 216)

Learning French and learning to think, learning to desire, is all mixed up in my head, until I can't tell the difference. French is what released me from the cool complacency of the R Resisters, made me want, and like wanting, unbuttoned me and sent me packing. French demands my obedience, gives me permission to try too hard, to squinch up my face to make the words sound right. French houses words like "existentialism" that connote abstract thinking, difficulties to which I can get the key. And body parts which I can claim. French got me away from my family and taught me how to talk. Made me an adult. And the whole drama of it is in that "r," how deep in my throat, how different it feels. (pp. 140-141)

Excerpts from Richard Watson. (1995). *The philosopher's demise: Learning French*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.

I loved learning to read this new language. It was all in the mind. The instructor devoted, at most, fifteen minutes of the first class period to French pronunciation, but we were never required to speak or write the language, to read it. I read it very well, earning an A for the yearlong, ten-hour course. Moreover, some years later I took the Ph.D. reading exam in reading French, I scored 100 percent. (p. 1)

I went to France to do library research now and then, and although my ability to speak French improved slightly and I became very good at understanding French spoken to me, I never felt any great need to make a serious effort to learn to speak French, no more than had my former professors and language teachers at SUI [State University of Iowa] felt any need to make me learn to speak (as well as read) the language in the first place. (p. 3)

I had an enormous reading vocabulary, but I could not connect it to my minuscule speaking vocabulary. When I tried to say something, the words eluded me. They did not come up mispronounced, they did not come up at all, I suppose because I read French rapidly, passing over the printed words without imagining any sounds at all, going directly from print to meaning. Some years before, I had noticed—not without pride—that I could be reading a book consciously unaware as to whether it was in French or English. But that entire sight-recognition vocabulary was useless to me in my attempt to speak French. (p. 6)

It was clear that it embarrassed me to speak French. I knew exactly why that was. I didn't want to sound like Charles Boyer in the movies of my childhood. We hooted and groaned when he breathed down the neck of some woman on the screen. And there was the suggestion that he might do things to them offscreen that no real man would ever be caught dead doing.

A great suspicion came over me: Real Men Don't Speak French. But just as you must survive humiliation and submit to agonizing tension, so also must you over-come embarrassment. Make an ass of yourself. If you want to learn. (p. 12)

My French was far from the worst among the foreigners. On any fair assessment, it was among the best. I noticed that the other American, who spoke far more fluently than I, did not make the elisions between words that are essential for speaking colloquial French. (p. 14)

The distinguished English historian of science didn't do accents. Instead, he read French words as though they were English, with particular stress on all the endings that are silent in French. (p. 14)

The Italian read his paper with Italian accents, the Japanese with Japanese gutturals and deletions, and the Spaniard was halfway through his paper before any-one realized that he was reading it in French, not in Spanish. All in all, I was quite pleased with myself,

except for having to answer my questions in English. On a scale of 1 to 10, I thought I surely rated no lower than an 8, whereas the Englishman got a 6 for having to have the questions translated for him into English, although he did then, sort of, answer them in French. But I had no illusions. I could not really speak French. (pp. 14-15)

Perhaps it was just as well. All I had learned in six months of tutoring was how to read French out loud. If I had not already known this, three days at the conference would have convinced me. At the end I could not even speak the few words and sentences that had always been my mainstays in France. Something deep in me dictated that it was better to say nothing, to be thought bereft of any spoken French, than to expose the limited extent of what I knew. Moreover, to my horror, I discovered that if I did try to use the bits of spoken French that had served me in the past, all the old mispronunciations remained. My new knowledge of how to make the sounds had not transferred. I remained silent and watched the show. (p. 16)

My wife, Pat, is an archaeologist and has worked in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. She is good at languages and has studied Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish, and Turkish as well as French, Spanish, and German. But often in the Near East, she would be tongue-tied while I blithely carried on conversations with a few hundred words and rudimentary grammar that I had gleaned from that wonderful and I am afraid now defunct series of blue-backed books titled *Teach Yourself Persian*, or whatever language you wanted to speak. One could not say that I really spoke Kurdish, for example, but I communicated enthusiastically and well enough. With time to think, Pat could speak these languages correctly, but I just talked, any old way. (p. 17)

What I wanted, was that when I asked a distinguished Cartesian scholar a question, as I did in a discussion period at the conference in Descartes¹, but had not dared to do in Paris, what I wanted was that he understand and answer my question, that he not look as though the village idiot had spoken to him with all the earnestness of his imbecility and as clearly as a cleft palate permitted. (p. 23)

I was more tense than I have ever been in my life or ever want to be again. The first time I ever climbed a mountain wall with hundreds of feet of exposure below me, that time we arrived back at the entrance of a cave to find a wall of water roaring in and had to crawl down-stream as fast as we could for a long distance to clamber up into passages above water level, my Ph.D. oral exam—none of those times could begin to compete with the state of tension I was enduring now.

And how am I to characterize or express adequately my sensations when with every indication of justified anger and disgust, The Professor called me an idiot and an imbecile? To be sure, she called others in the class the same as the days went on, but I was the first. I, who had been a professor in charge of my own classes for twenty-five years. In some sense of that maligned word, I suppose the experience was edifying. (p. 39)

¹ The village in France where the philosopher René Descartes was born.

It was not the first time in my life that I had been called an imbecile in class. But imbecility is in America, so to speak, a relative thing. In France, it is exactly defined, and certified. (p. 40)

I have mentioned a possible psychological reason. Although I loved learning to read French and enjoy reading French philosophers and writers, I have a distinct dislike for the sound of spoken French. Many Americans do. Why? Because it's weak. For American men at least, French sounds syrupy and effeminate. (p. 52)

... what made me realize how much I dislike the sound of French was the continual, unctuous, caressing repetition of "l'oiseau" ("the bird"). It is a word the French believe to be one of the most beautiful in their language. It is a word that cannot be pronounced without simpering, a word whose use should be restricted to children under five.

I did not want to speak French because it gave me the bird. (p. 53)

So how does one handle such an irrational response? I wondered if it was just the contrast with the English "bird," which is a strong hard word. How about the German word for bird, "Vogel"? I'm going to get to German in a moment. American men don't like to simper. And as I said, they get their notion of Frenchmen from the movies. Certainly no American boy of my generation ever wanted to grow up to be Charles Boyer. (p. 53) -

Watson concedes that he's exaggerating, but maintains his view.

All right. All right. But remember, I'm not trying to be reasonable about it. I'm just giving you my unadulterated, stupid, automatic, response. Real Men Don't Speak French. There has to be something to that. Where did I read that during World War I, French soldiers were known as "WeeWees"? Of course that's French for "Yes, yes" but really . . . (p. 54)

Why did I resist it so? Because, I think, all my life I have been trying to learn to write. These new French forms threatened to destroy what little progress I had made so far. Not only did I use English forms in speaking French, I was appalled to find myself using French forms when I was writing English. French was undermining my very being! My personality was in danger of disintegrating! A great clanging of alarm bells was set off in my deep unconscious, irritated by these alien influences seeping down from above. (p. 57)

The other thing I understood is why many writers resist learning a foreign language. They are defending the style and form they have perfected in their own language.

The mere reading of another language apparently does not present the same threat. But speaking is too close to writing. (p. 58)

I do not spell well in English, again perhaps a function of reading for meaning, not for the sound of words nor how they look on the page. I spell even worse in French. (Now that I have worked at learning to spell French words, I spell English words even worse than before.) On dictations I always made about twice as many errors as the number the

teacher announced as allowable. I began to worry about passing the dictation portion of the final exam . . . (p. 59)

At the Alliance Française, I sank lower and lower to bottom of the class. I never missed a session. I sat there paying intense attention and looking at the teacher with hopeful eyes.

My transition to this groveling state of supplication abrupt. During that first month with Claire, I was often impatient. I was used to being in charge and had consciously to hold myself down so as not to behave like a professor, not to speak up on all subjects like a know-it-all. I did know many things the younger students did not on subjects that came up in class discussion. But this problem evaporated like dew under the desert sun during the first hour with The Professor. By the end of the first day with her I was so anxious simply to be able to work out the exercises and answer the questions in class that I lost consciousness of ever having been a professor—or of knowing anything—at all. In The Professor's class I saw myself as did the youngest members—as a funny little old man with a white beard who was earnest and wanted to learn but who just wasn't very good or very bright. They liked me and would talk to me at break, but there was no question who was at the bottom of the class. (pp. 60-61)

It was a depressing prospect. To learn French I might to give up my lifelong adherence to the doctrine of extreme individualism. I had been attracted by French radicalism only to discover that in language the French are hidebound conservatives. (p. 81)

Once I decided to learn to speak French it became—did I say?—almost immediately an obsession. All those years of guilt and embarrassment at being a Cartesian scholar who could not speak French (even if no one else noticed or cared), the difference between what I was and what I appeared to be, combined to drive my ambition to a frenzy. I would learn to speak French, whatever it took, however long. One day, by God, I would sit at a table in a restaurant in Paris with a group of French Cartesian scholars, and we would talk! (p. 65)

Scholars compete for prestige, and each scholar—particularly each and every idiosyncratic French scholar—attempts to make dominant his own views and interpretations. In no place in the world is this competition more intense than in Paris, the intellectual capital of the Western world. Those tight little circles of the sort I was yearning just to look into were closed not through any particularly conscious intent, but because competition is so extreme among the small number who must be admitted that they haven't time to notice outsiders. Even more, in their assurance that the French intellectual circles are indeed the highest in the cosmos—a conviction they hold without ever thinking about it, as other people take for granted the air they breathe—French scholars can ignore the work of foreigners as having no relevance to them. Even French scientists seldom make reference to work in languages other than French. Another reason, of course, is that many of them can read only French. (p. 74)

I have always thought my bad spelling was due to inattention as to whether words end, say, with “an” or “on,” and the like. Would not impatient inattention also explain how I can look up the spelling of a word, clamp the dictionary shut, and then turn to my writing

and still not know how to spell it? I had gone through the procedure of looking it up; did I have to remember it, too? And doesn't everyone now and then reverse letters and numbers—"57" for "75" and even "Nood Gight"? Just today I asked for the "palt and sepper" at lunch, and as long as I can remember I have made that kind of exchange of initial letters perhaps once a week. Is that a kind of dyslexia? It really is not a serious problem in speaking and spelling. What is serious is my inability to listen to sounds and repeat them back. I was poor at memorizing poems and piano pieces in my youth. Again, this was attributed by both my teachers and me to a combination of laziness and impatience, to that same refusal to spend boring hours practicing that drove me from the chemistry lab when I was a freshman in college.

But now I was trying. I was practicing. I was listen and repeating back. I read Georges Simenon's mystery novels out loud in French, trying to accumulate an auditory vocabulary. But time and again when I wanted use a French word that I knew I knew, a word I would recognize instantly if I either read it or heard it, it would not come up. I could not hear nor see it in my mind. (pp. 102-103)

I had always liked school. In the past when fall came, and I saw young children setting out with their books and new supplies, I felt kind of a joyful uplift that surely reflects my own childhood experiences. One week after I finished my course at the Alliance Française, school started for French children and the streets of Paris filled with their passage and chatter. I witnessed this advent with a sensation of stomach wrenching horror. Thank God I was not still in school. (p. 127)

Slowly I recovered. I had been in Paris now for three months and had done almost nothing but study French. We went to the Comédie Française and to another play, and I understood most of the dialogue. We went out to dinner with French friends, and spent entire evenings speaking French.

"Look," Pat said to me, "the transformation is amazing. Before you could hardly say a word. Now you carry on conversations for hours in French."

"Last summer you couldn't say a word," Claude said. "Now you won't shut up."

I started working again in the Bibliothèque Nationale. I had a nice long chat with the woman in charge of the rare books reading room. People asked me for directions in the street and understood me when I told them where to go. I was, after a fashion, speaking French. (p. 129)

Anyway, there we were. And there, seated facing me, unable to escape at last, was Professor Marion. Now he would have to talk to me. I spoke to him at length, in French, rather well, I thought.

"Speak English," he said. And he answered me in English.

"Look," I said heatedly, "your English is just as bad as my French."

"But I am French," he said.

"Then speak French," I said.

"Are you sure you can understand?" he asked.

“Of course I can understand,” I said. “I’m not an idiot.”

“All right,” he said, “I’ll speak French. But you speak English. Don’t try to speak French. Your French is terrible.” (p. 133)