



EDITORIAL:

INTERFACE: A Place of Interaction

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The academic world has been habituated to an organization that emphasizes the autonomy of each discipline and the purity of its subject, while at the same time it exults in the self-evidence of the founding premises of any given discipline. In the academic domain that **INTERFACE** claims to belong, this habitual organization is realized as a distinct department for each European language/literature (i.e., Department of German, Department of French, Department of Spanish, Department of Classics, and so on), a fact that, when combined with the principle of autonomy mentioned above, usually leads the members of each of these separate departments to consider their work to be different, separate, and unrelated to the work of the members of the other departments of other languages.

Yet, this organizational model has always been subject to both internal and external pressures. Internally, the most prominent manifestation of challenges to the integrity of each of the disciplines (French, German, Spanish,...) is the conflict between Language Studies and Literature Studies. So, for example, while everyone agrees that knowing French is a prerequisite to reading French literature, not everyone would agree that a French Department in a university should include both teaching and researching French language and French literature; nor, should the inclusion of both is agreed, is it guaranteed that this agreement would also entail agreement regarding the relative importance and status of either of them vis-a-vis the other.

Externally, the problem of the autonomy of each of the European Languages/Literatures departments is challenged by the mutual influence exercised by one language on another and by one national

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literature on another. For example, English may very well be a West Germanic language, but since the eleventh century, and as a result of heavy borrowing, its vocabulary is mainly that of a Romance language; and since it acquired the status of a *lingua franca*, it has become itself a source of borrowing to Romance languages (e.g., *le weekend*, *le bus*, *etc.*). Of course, with languages one can relatively easily find ways to accommodate the study of influences *and* maintain the autonomy of, say, English and French; however, when it comes to literature the same task becomes much more complicated. For instance, Goethe (whose work belongs to the German Department) is widely accepted as having profoundly influenced Joyce (whose work belongs to the English Department), but then a question arises: How much should one understand Goethe in order to be able to understand Joyce? The issue becomes even more complicated when one takes into account that both Joyce and Goethe have been influenced by Graeco-Roman literature (works that belong to the Classics Department). How proficient in Graeco-Roman literature should one be in order to be proficient in either Goethe or Joyce? Also, how knowledgeable in both Goethe and Graeco-Roman literature should one be in order to be able to distinguish which of the Graeco-Roman echoes in the works of Joyce come from Joyce's own direct exposure to it, and which are re-echoes of Goethe's exposure to it? Indeed, which department would be best suited to consider the study of Joyce (or of Goethe, or of ...) as part of its domain?

The questions above have been posed to indicate the *aporia* and the cul-de-sac to which the institutional organization of our academic universe has been led, and is leading us. On the one hand, it seems a remarkably good idea, in the search for the advances that specialization makes possible, to promote organizational units that foster specialization; on the other hand, this practice becomes counter-productive if it is not accompanied by the realization that specialization in a particular field is only one of the apexes of a pyramid which has as its base specializations in other more or less related fields, a pyramid that, when turned upside down, its earlier apex will become the base, and an element of the earlier base will be the new apex.

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INTERFACE aims to become a stepping stone towards a more integrated approach to the study of European languages/literatures in East Asia. Our starting thesis was to reject the oppositions that traditional academia sets up (*language vs. literature*, on the one hand, and *German vs. French vs. Spanish vs. Classics vs. ...*, on the other hand), and to re-conceive them as two continua where one can find stages that are completely distinct from each other, and stages where the boundaries are fuzzy and unclear. Equipped with this starting thesis, we are inviting colleagues from all over East Asia (and beyond) to take part in a dialogue that would allow all of the participants to share their experiences, explore their complementarities, and offer each other the background needed to push for higher levels of achievement.

Merriam-Webster define interface as “the place or area at which different things meet and communicate with or affect each other”; **INTERFACE** aspires to become this “place or area” for scholars of European Languages and Literatures.

