

THE PROBLEM OF THE VERNACULAR

Comparative Literature 1813K | Fall 2014 | Tue-Thu 1:00-2:20 | Wilson Hall 304



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Course Description:

It has been said that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy. Under what conditions do dialects, vernaculars, creoles, and slangs become mediums for literary and artistic expression? How have writers in different cultures managed the relationship between their “official” national languages and their more intimate mother tongues? This course explores this problem in a variety of literary traditions, including Chinese, Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Scots, Latin and the Romance vernaculars, and a variety of other languages.

Assigned texts:

1. Dohra Ahmad, *Rotten English: A Literary Anthology* (W.W. Norton, 2007).
2. Patrick Chamoiseau, *Solibo Magnificent* (Anchor, 1999).
3. Anton Shammas, *Arabesques* (Univ. of California Press, 2001).

Course Requirements

- 1. Class attendance and participation: 30%** – Consistent and engaged participation is essential in this class. You are invited to read each session's assigned readings carefully and critically, and to come to class with something to say about them. Absences may be excused only for medical reasons.
- 2. Response papers: 10%** – A brief essay (400 words) that addresses a specific issue arising from the week's readings will be assigned each week. Response papers must be submitted in hard copy at the beginning of class.
- 3. Student presentation: 10%** – Each student will prepare a 10-minute presentation on a specific vernacular tradition based on independent research and in consultation with the professor. More details will be provided in class.
- 4. Midterm exam: 20%** – To be held in class, the exam will consist of IDs of key figures, works, and theories from the first half of the course, along with an essay.
- 5. Final paper: 30%** – The final paper (10-12 pages) is broken down into two different components: abstract and bibliography (5%), and a final draft (25%). Please note that this course will meet once during reading period.
- 6. Academic honesty:** Students are expected to abide by the tenets of Brown University's Academic Code. If you have any questions about issues of citation, collaboration, or the use of source materials, please do not hesitate to consult me or a teaching assistant.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: Please inform me if you have a disability or other condition that might require some modification of any of these course procedures. You may speak with me after class or during office hours. For more information, please contact Student and Employee Accessibility Services at 401-863-9588, or by email at SEAS@brown.edu.

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Course schedule

Week 1: What is a Vernacular?

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| Thu. Sept. 4: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduction |
| Tue. Sept. 9: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Louise Bennett, "Colonization in Reverse," <i>Rotten English</i>, 38-39 (YouTube link)• Louise Bennett, "Bans O'Killing," <i>Rotten English</i>, 40-41• Charles Ferguson, "Diglossia" |
| Thu. Sept. 11: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gloria Anzaldúa, From <i>Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza</i> (1987), <i>Rotten English</i>, 437-451.• Joshua Fishman, "Bilingualism With and Without Diglossia; Diglossia With and Without Bilingualism"• <u>Response paper #1</u>: How does Joshua Fishman's account of diglossia and bilingualism differ from Charles Ferguson's? What kind of critical and interpretive possibilities do these distinctions make room for? |

Weeks 2 & 3: “If English Was Good Enough for Jesus Christ, It’s Good Enough for Me…” Sacred Languages & Unholy Vernaculars

- Tue. Sept. 16:
- The Tower of Babel Story in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 11:1-9); the *Book of Jubilees*; Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*
- Thu. Sept. 18:
- John Trevisa, “Dialogue Between the Lord and the Clerk On Translation,” in *The Idea of the Vernacular* (pp. 130-35, with explanatory notes on 135-38)
 - Peter Burke, “Latin: A Language In Search of a Community,” *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (chapter 2, pp. 43-60)
 - Response paper #2: Whose arguments are more compelling to you in John Trevisa’s “Dialogue of the Clerk and the Lord on Translation”?
- Tue. Sept. 23:
- Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia* (Liber Primus, I-XIX)
 - Peter Burke, “Vernaculars in Competition,” *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (chapter 3, 61-88)
- Thu. Sept. 25:
- Dante, *Convivio* (excerpts)
 - Charles Chestnutt, “Po’ Sandy,” *Rotten English*, 101-114
 - Response paper #3: TBD

Weeks 4 & 5: God’s Speech, the Language of Quraysh, and Arabizi

- Tue. Sept. 30:
- Taha Hussein, “The Future of Culture in Egypt,” excerpts
 - Edward Said, “Living in Arabic”
 - Elias Muhanna, “Translating ‘Frozen’ Into Arabic,” *The New Yorker*
- Thu. Oct. 2:
- *Qur’an* 12:2, 13:37, 16:103, 26:195, 46:12
 - Ibn Khaldun on Arabic language and poetry, *Muqaddima*, 431-59
 - Response paper #4: Can there be such a thing as an Arab who doesn’t speak (classical) Arabic?
- Tue. Oct. 7:
- Anton Shammas, *Arabesques* (3-131)
- Thu. Oct. 9:
- Anton Shammas, *Arabesques* (133-263)
 - Response paper #5: TBD

Week 6 & 7: Language Planning and Managing Multilingualism

- Tue. Oct. 14:
- Lu Xun, “Diary of a Madman”
 - Louis-Jean Calvet, “Among the Administrators,” *Language Wars* (pp. 111-25)
- Thu. Oct. 16:
- Lu Xun, “An Outsider’s Chats About Written Language” ([link](#))
 - Response paper #6: TBD

Tue. Oct. 21: • TBD

Thu. Oct. 23: **Midterm exam**

Weeks 8 & 9: Linguistic and Literary Revivalism

Tue. Oct. 28: • Ioannis Psycharis, *My Journey*, excerpts
• Peter Mackridge, “A Language in the Image of the Nation: Modern Greek and Some Parallel Cases”

Thu. Oct. 30 • Yosef Haim Brenner, “Pages: From the Notebook of a Hebrew Writer”
• Gershom Scholem, “Thoughts About Our Language”
• Aharon Shabtai, “The Reason to Live Here”
• Anton Shammas, “The Meeting that Was, The Meeting that Wasn’t”
• Response paper #7: Greek and Hebrew are often compared as similar cases of “constructed” and highly “ideologized” literary languages. Do you agree?

Tue. Nov. 4: • Tom Leonard, “Unrelated Incidents,” *Rotten English*, 78-79 ([link](#))
• Hugh MacDiarmid, selected poems: “The Watergaw,” excerpt from *On a Raised Beach*, “Gairmscoile,” and “Speech, My Beloved”
• Reading prompts: What is a watergaw? Why all the strange terminology in the excerpt from *On a Raised Beach*? See if you can make sense of “Gairmscoile” using your own ingenuity and the good humor of your septuagenarian Scottish roommate. And finally, who is the strange woman in “Speech, My Beloved?”

Thu. Nov. 6: • Johann Peter Hebel, “Kannitverstan,” “Unexpected Reunion”
• Martin Heidegger, “The Language of Johann Peter Hebel”
• Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “What is a Minor Literature?”
• Response paper #8: Hebel’s stories have been extolled by Kafka, Canetti, Heidegger, Goethe, Bloch, Hesse, and others. What is so remarkable about them?
• **Abstracts and bibliographies due for final papers**

Weeks 10 & 11: Caribbean Literature & Créolité

Tue. Nov. 11: • Patrick Chamoiseau, *Solibo Magnificent*, pp. 1-110

Thu. Nov. 13: • Patrick Chamoiseau, *Solibo Magnificent*, pp. 111-85
• Response paper #9: Open response.

Tue. Nov. 18: • Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphael Confiant, “In Praise of Creoleness”
• Derek Walcott, “A Letter to Chamoiseau,” *The New York Review of Books* (8.14.97)
• Response paper #10: Contrast the significance of Creole to Chamoiseau, Walcott, and Césaire. Can you detect the points of consensus and discord?

- Thu. Nov. 20:
- Nicolás Guillén poems (“Tú No Sabe Inglés,” “Mulata,” “Negro Bombón”) translated by Langston Hughes
 - Cypress Hill, “Latin Thugs”; Shakira, “Loca”; Dizzee Rascal, “Jezebel”

Weeks 12 & 13: English, a Cosmopolitan Vernacular?

- Tue. Nov. 25:
- Junot Diaz, “The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” (2000), *Rotten English*, 116-64.
- Thu. Nov. 27: *Thanksgiving break*
- Tue. Dec. 2:
- William Faulkner, “That Evening Sun”
 - Two interviews with William Faulkner at the Univ. of Virginia (“What’s the Good Word” radio program, May 6 1958; “University Radio Show,” May 7 1957)
- Thu. Dec. 4:
- Zora Neale Hurston, “Story in Harlem Slang”
 - Oakland, CA school board resolutions on teaching African-American Vernacular English (1996 and 1997)
 - “Black English is Not a Language, Jackson Says” (*New York Times*, Dec. 23, 1996)
- Tue. Dec. 16:
- **Final paper due**