

## FRENCH PLUS!

As an advisor and professor of French, I encourage students to link their French major with another discipline, such as journalism, business, international studies, or education. In addition to participating in study abroad programs, students with language proficiency can find internships and other work opportunities related to their future careers. In some cases, departments have established connections that students can pursue. Last December, one of my undergraduate students, Christy Johnson, astounded me by landing a paid summer position with Larousse in Paris through her own efforts. An outstanding student in journalism and French with experience working at the Ohio University Press, Christy sent off her resume to a few publishing houses in Paris. The rest of this remarkable adventure is best told by Christy herself.

Throwing myself on the mercy of the French labor market made fancy words like *chimerical* come to life: my pleadings to small houses Stock and Callmann-Lévy ended up in transatlantic dumpsters. On October 16 last year, though, came the word from giant Larousse—could I come at the end of the month and work until January? My reluctant “no” left me with a few shreds of morale, however, as I was told other offers just might be lurking on the horizon. On December 13 came the second outstretched hand—would I like to spend my summer helping prepare the newest edition of the Concise English-French Dictionary?

I shook and, a few hours after my arrival on June 27, found myself in the midst of an intense debriefing from Marc Chabrier, my new boss. This courtesy acclimatization lasted all of three hours. The following Monday, with explicit instructions to layout computer code examples for the tech mavens who would put the dictionary together, I was thrown into the race at full speed.

Things only went faster and seemed harder, compelling me to shun my mental image of lexicography as a discipline that required nothing more than a dreamy fascination with language. For about two weeks I spent long hours with the flowchart-like Epic Editor software, reorganizing entries in the dictionary’s English-French section to make irregular plurals and weird phonetic transcriptions easier to understand. Then there was the proofreading job for what the French call the dictionary’s “instruction manual:” believe me, finding the right translation is often more of a Mensa teaser than it seems.

Teasing out new bugs in the beta version of a multilingual dictionary on CD-ROM was both a necessary evil and a frustrating

pleasure. If no one else had come across these glitches before, then what was I missing? If some poor sop clicked on the pronunciation icon for “garbage” and was instead taught how to say “garish,” would it be my fault? Why couldn’t I work through the instructions as fast as the Irishman sitting next to me, and, for God’s sake, why hadn’t anyone told him I shared his native tongue? We spent most of a morning speaking French until he dared pop the question.

One day halfway through my internship, Marc handed me the page proofs from Larousse’s biggest English-French dictionary—the kind meant for non-native speakers who *really* want to pretend they know what they’re talking about—and announced that a new task was ahead. Using the proofs as a guide, I was to ensure that entries in the Concise dictionary were appropriately tagged “American” or “British.” I was free to make suggestions about American or British entries, he added. All I had to do was scribble them in the margins of the Concise dictionary’s endless list of entries.

Feeling slightly confident, I leapt into the letter “A.” Making sure that Frenchmen and women understood the difference between an ice lolly and a popsicle didn’t seem too hard, after all. But entry by entry, I discovered that the dictionary’s authors had labeled the Equal Rights Amendment an American *law* and decided that *cheesy* was worth only a literal translation, as in a *cheesy sauce*. The examples didn’t stop screaming at me.

My new job absorbed me for hours at a time, sometimes entrancing me so much that a fellow intern would point out my daydreaming with a hint of good-natured surprise. By summer’s end I had begun the letter “M” and convinced the publishing house to let me do some homework. Hired to continue my “re-reading” work, as you might literally translate it, from my parent’s home in central Ohio, I worked partway through the “P’s” until budget and time constraints forced me to retire the red pen.

Larousse and its host city offered me much more than an arena for professional and linguistic development. Before I left for Paris, I had read a textbook haughtily entitled *The French* for one of my classes and somewhat expected every “French” I met to conform to its long list of cultural platitudes. But not every Parisian flees to the Riviera in July—many, including a good friend of mine, can’t afford the luxury. French kids can be brats, too. And, yes, colleagues *can* be quite friendly at work; you will never hear anyone in Larousse’s Bilingual Dictionaries Department call a fellow editor’s attention with

*vous*. The thirty-five-hour workweek? Majesty on paper.

This summer, I learned the difference between an indicator and a tag. I discovered the stunning richness of another dialect of English. I came to appreciate the sticky but magnificent tangle of fact and judgment that make reference publishing what it is. But most importantly, I became a skeptic. I will be wary of the definite article for the rest of my life.

For me, Paris is more than a great village pulsating with brilliance, misery, ambition, and creative angst. The insignificant role I played there was a catalyst for profound personal transformation.

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