Language and Faith:

TEACHING LANGUAGES IN FAITH-BASED COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

BY NIELS-ERIK ANDREASEN

Not long ago, I stumbled upon a new book with this startling title: *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality, and Foreign Language Learning*, by David I. Smith and Barbara Carvill.[1] It asks a simple question: Is there a special, meaningful way of teaching and learning foreign languages from the standpoint of Christian faith?[2] I immediately became interested because I thought that if the answer to this question was positive, there might be two benefits for Adventist Colleges Abroad (ACA) and its sponsoring institutions. First, we might find a new motivation for teaching languages to fairly unwilling American (and other) students in Adventist colleges and universities. Second, our language programs might actually strengthen the faith base of our ACA colleges and universities—both the sending and the receiving institutions.

But first let me confess that, although I have taught Hebrew and Greek to theology students, I am not really a language teacher by trade; therefore, I will not deal specifically with pedagogy and curriculum. Nevertheless, I do recall being a language student during my school days in Denmark—that little country that required all its students to learn a little Swedish, German, English, and French (but regrettably, not Italian). Reading the book by Smith and Carvill brought back some memories from those days.

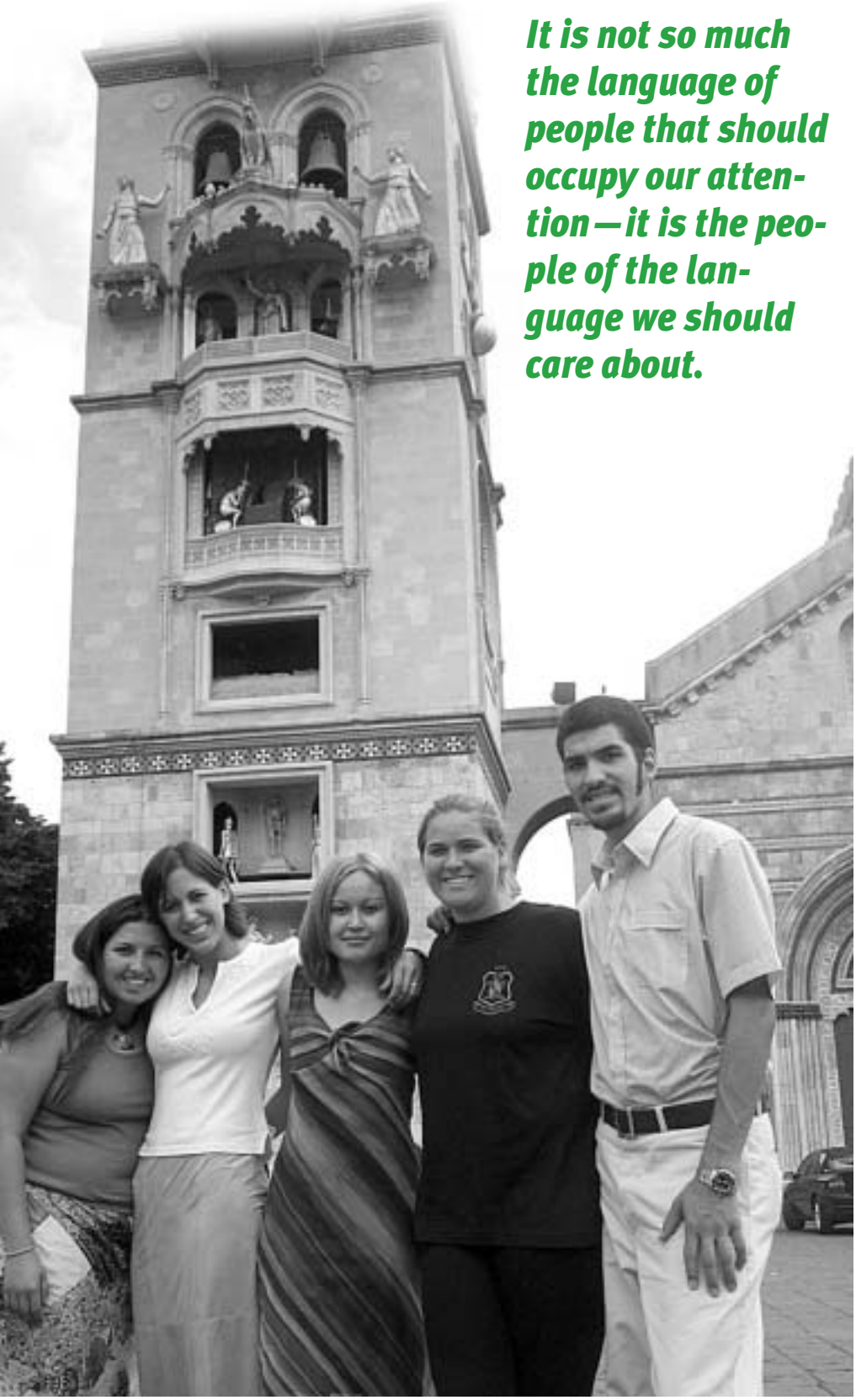
Language study has practical uses—it enables us to do business abroad, to enrich our culture, to become effective missionaries and diplomats, to travel painlessly, and so on. But at its heart, language study is learning to welcome strangers and to receive the gifts they so generously bring.

Let's consider some key issues relating to language and faith.

Why Learn Languages?

Chester Finn in his provocative book, *We Must Take Charge*,[3] tells about flying from the midwest United States to Boston with a group of young adults on their way to vacation in Frankfurt, Germany. After a few drinks and much laughter, one of the young travelers asked a friend about the time difference between the United States and Germany. "Don't know," came back the answer. "I have never flown across the Pacific before."

After a while, they got things sorted out and continued on their way to explore Western Europe. At first,



It is not so much the language of people that should occupy our attention—it is the people of the language we should care about.

The photos in this article depict Adventist Colleges Abroad students studying and traveling as they learn a new language.

this amusing story seems to have more to do with geography than languages. But on second thought, it also points to a deeper problem, the evident superficiality with which so many of our students view other peoples—who they are, what they do, how they communicate, and where they live.

Learning German might help those young travelers, but not much, unless they do so for the right reason—in order to appreciate other cultures. It is not so much the language of people that should occupy our attention—it is the people of the language we should care about. More often than not, language students and teachers choose to acquaint themselves with the other person's language rather than with the other person. However, it is not the strange language, but the stranger who brings the gift of which we speak. In light of this distinction, let's consider some common reasons we give for learning languages.[4]

1. *To Succeed in Business*

The NAFTA treaty and the European Union have motivated language study, often in connection with international business. Job opportunities and postings abroad often make language study a necessity—and fluency in multiple languages can spell the difference between success and failure. While this motivation for language study is pragmatic and clear, it fails to address the question that always preoccupies a faith-based education, namely the human value attached to our study. Lacking that, it may still matter little whether Germany lies across the Atlantic or the Pacific to a pragmatic language student, so long as he or she succeeds in "closing the deal."

2. *To Influence or Control Others*

During the early phases of the Iraqi war, the Alliance military leaders deplored the lack of soldiers, diplomats, and administrators with adequate Arabic language skills. The objective of overturning a political regime, rebuilding a national infrastructure, and maintaining the peace while retaining the support of the citizenry has become a near-impossible task. It would be greatly facilitated if the occupiers/liberators possessed adequate language skills.

3. *To Become an International Person*

Communication technology has made it possible for people around the world to move out of isolation and establish new relationships. But often, these relationships reveal deep cultural chasms between people. Language study can put one into contact with other parts of the world and make one "worldly wise"—a global citizen.

4. *To Get Around in the World*

Travelers and tourists often undertake some minimal study of the languages they will encounter when away from home. They can thus ask for directions, book rooms, and order food, but cannot converse with or get to know the people whose countries they visit. In fact, most tourists are far more interested in the castles and cathedrals, museums and monuments, beaches and bars than in the schools, governments, and families in the countries they visit. This kind of superficial language study ignores the soul of the language, namely the human heart and mind.

5. *To Gain Cultural Sophistication*

A Francophile or Anglophile seeks to escape her or his own culture and its perceived provincial limits. Sometimes, this interest in languages borders on snobbery. Language skills acquired with this objective in mind may appear artificial and may even prevent meaningful contact between strangers. This is incompatible with Christian values.

Scripture teaches us that it is discovery of the other person that enables the blessings of the stranger to flow.

6. *To Change the World*

Missionaries, diplomats, and political emissaries learn languages in order to persuade others to change. Often their intentions are good, but they may behave in a self-serving, manipulative way. Christians have long believed that missionaries should share the gospel in the indigenous language of their mission field, partly to make it more understandable to the hearers, and partly to enrich the missionaries' own understanding of the peoples. Conversely, missionaries who do not learn the language of their mission field force their new converts to hear the gospel in a foreign language, creating converts who are tourists in their own land, so to speak.

The Testimony of Scripture

The above reasons for learning languages, while having some merit and bringing some benefit to the learner, still do not achieve the full blessings available to faith-based language learning. To gain that benefit, the language student must discover not only the other language, but also the person who speaks it. And Scripture teaches us that it is discovery of the other person that enables the blessings of the stranger to flow. What does Scripture say about the stranger, his or her blessing, and the strange language?

The story of the Tower of Babel tells us about people who ended up not understanding one another. It is full of irony and judgment, but it does not present a negative valuation of languages, as some have thought. Rather, it describes the people's arrogance before God, which is revealed through their vain determination to storm "the gate of God" (the literal meaning of *Babel*) by means of an ambitious building project.

But the project falls far short of their expectations. That is expressed ironically in the Bible story, which has God looking down from His exalted position in heaven and straining to get that petty human project into view (Genesis 11:5). Such a singular human affront is severely judged by God and leads to the confusion caused by unknown languages (the Bible's explanation of Babel). As a result, the project languishes.

However, this does not imply that different languages are the tool of divine judgment or that ultimate redemption from this judgment means overcoming the multiplicity of languages. In other words, the Pentecostal gift of tongues is not the redemptive answer to the story of the Tower of Babel. Instead, the multiplicity of languages affirms diversity in the earthly family of God and curtails human power and arrogance in His presence. The gift of languages during the first Christian Pentecost, on the other hand, were bestowed with the Spirit and showed those who participated that salvation was to flow freely to all members of the diverse human family.

In short, God did not punish the tower builders by giving them different languages. Instead, He protected them from a single-minded but destructive human arrogance toward their Creator by offering them diversity through a variety of languages. This diversity points out the

way of grace in that otherwise sorry tale. This way of grace becomes more explicit in the following chapters (Genesis 12 ff), which report the election first of one person, and then one people, to mediate divine grace to the many peoples in the world by becoming gift-bearing strangers in their midst.

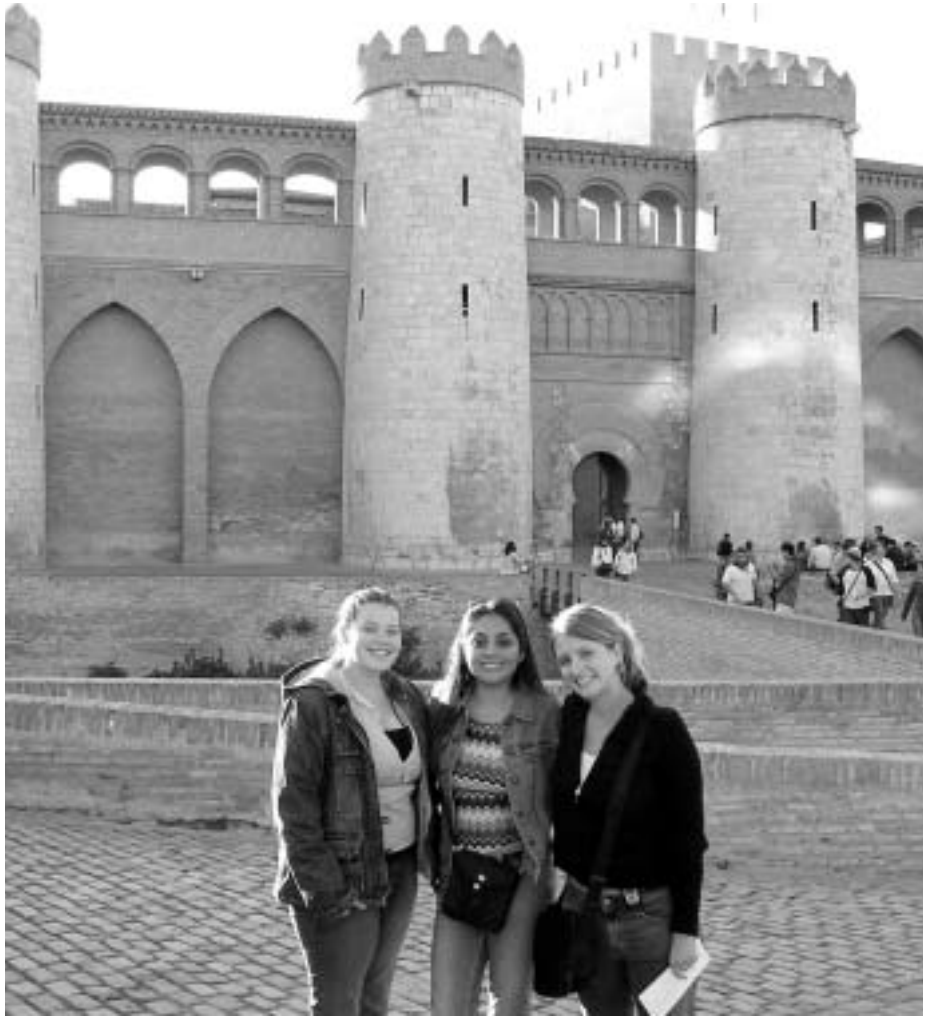
The Gift of the Stranger

Scripture tells us that the Hebrews originated "beyond the river," that is, east of the Euphrates, in the area that is now Iraq. In ancient times, the residents included Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Persians. Contemporaries of Abraham likely spoke an east Semitic language, wrote on clay tablets, engaged in agriculture and trade, built temple towers like the tower of Babel, and traveled extensively. They knew about being strangers.

Abraham and his family settled among strangers in the west Semitic language area. They probably had to learn a new language, or at least a new dialect, cope with new customs, a different climate, and new crops. There were tensions with the local populations at times, temptations to compromise one's principles, and outright dangers. We find all of these challenges in the patriarchal stories.

The newcomers remained strangers for a very long time. Called Hebrews, they were a peregrinate people (wanderers) who still remembered their home connection (Deuteronomy 26:5-9). Hence, both Isaac and Jacob married into families back home. However, the 13 children of Jacob eventually began to make their presence felt in the new land by marrying into and then defeating the citizens of Shechem (Genesis 34). But soon, they became strangers again, this time in Egypt. Upon their return, they continued to live as strangers in a well-populated land while attempting, though not always successfully, to share the gifts of the stranger.

But what gifts and blessings did these strangers bring with them to their new land? Abraham was told that through his family, other families of the land would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). There is no indication as to how that might happen, but the idea of being a good guest in a new land is established, and Abraham and his successors set about to do it right away by providing security (Genesis 14:13-16), paying taxes (14:20), and improving the land by digging wells (26:17-



33). That pattern continues in subsequent Bible stories.

Perhaps the best-known example of a stranger benefitting his hosts is Joseph (Genesis 39-47). He treated the Egyptians far better than his brothers treated him. He learned their language, married an Egyptian woman, and anticipated the deadly famine with a food security plan. And, judging from the accounts of his reunion with his family, he maintained the heart of a stranger—an understanding, compassionate heart and a generous attitude toward those whose culture and manners differed from his own.

The story of Moses in Midian offers another interesting example (Exodus 2ff.). In preparation for his lifework, Moses became first an Egyptian and then a Midianite, both strangers to his own people. Two women helped him become an Egyptian—his sister Miriam and an Egyptian princess. And another woman, Zippora, the daughter of Jethro, helped him settle in with the Midianite shepherds. In both instances, he adopted his host people as his own, receiving his name (Moses) from one, and his children from the other. He spoke new languages and entered new occupations, becoming a good stranger twice. In fact, we might say, with a long glance toward the Messiah, that he prepared for his lifework by becoming a stranger to the people he was called to bless.

The story of Ruth is equally remarkable. She twice married strangers, learned new customs in the process, embraced a foreign mother-in-law, adopted a new country and a new religion, and founded a dynasty. We generally read this story from the perspective of an Israelite, admiring this strange woman for accepting and adopting a new national and religious identity so completely. But we might also consider it from a Moabite perspective—a women who gave up everything that had defined her from birth, even when she could have returned to her own identity. It seems clear that, with this story, the Bible deliberately points to an important pattern—namely, that God's greatest gifts come through strangers.

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Responding to the Gifts of Strangers

Every gift of the stranger invites a gift in return. The legendary hospitality of the patriarch Abraham to his three unknown guests may have been social protocol at the time, but it also indicates that strangers are particularly sensitive toward strangers (Genesis 18). That principle becomes legislated in the Deuteronomic version of the fourth commandment (chap. 5:15), which calls on Israelite people, who knew the lot of strangers, to extend Sabbath freedom to strangers and resident aliens (Hebrew *gerim*), so that people with no social or political rights could enjoy freedoms equal to those of the citizen.

This gracious acceptance of the stranger into the community is further elaborated by the prophets, notably in Isaiah 56, which portrays the new Israel. Here foreigners and eunuchs who have lost their natural place in society will not only have it restored, but actually will be given a position of prominence because of the principle imbedded in the gift of the stranger, despite ancient legislation to the contrary (Deuteronomy 23:1ff.). They will enjoy special recognition and a place in God's house of prayer (Isaiah 56:7).

The prophets, especially the later ones, were faced with the disintegration of the nation of Israel. First, it was divided into two smaller states, each of which endured foreign occupation and exile, and finally permanent settlements in foreign lands. The diaspora of the Jews began, and with it the perennial question, unanswered till this day—how do God's people make their way in the world as strangers? Some have proposed that the Hebrew scrolls help answer this question. The sa-

cred documents played a prominent role in the diaspora synagogue (indeed, they may have been responsible for bringing it into existence), and the synagogue in turn became the center of the diaspora community. Conversely, of all the gifts the Jews brought with them into the diaspora, the scrolls became their most enduring legacy, one that formed the foundation of faith and ethics for much of the world—certainly in the West. The same scrolls, soon supplemented by new ones, also became the authority for the Christian mission once the eyewitnesses of Jesus had died. And of course, this gift of

"the Book" (the canon of scrolls) is mediated through many languages.

Strangers in the Gospel and in the Church

In essence, the gospel is the story of a stranger who brought immense gifts to all humankind, even though He was poor in every way. His gifts were His words. Never did anyone speak like this man, His listeners said of Him (Matthew 7:28). They heard words of forgiveness, healing, understanding, life, and hope. He reached back into the Hebrew scrolls to search for those living words, which He translated into Aramaic for the common people (and perhaps Greek for the people of learning). Thus it may be said that if Greek culture was transmitted through architecture, art, and philosophy, and the Roman legacy was law and politics, the legacy of Jesus was living words, preserved in common Greek and then shared through translation in every other language of the world.

But, of course, Jesus Himself was a stranger, the last of many strangers God sent into this world bringing gifts (Matthew 21:33-41). Indeed, it seems that all God's gifts come this way—through strangers: Abraham in Canaan; Joseph in Egypt; Moses in the Sinai; David in Saul's court; Daniel in Babylon; Jesus in Nazareth; and Paul in Asia, Greece, and Rome. If we desire these gifts, we must receive them from strangers and in turn pass them on to strangers.

When asked how He wanted to be received by His followers, Jesus answered: "I was a stranger and you invited me in" (Matthew 25:35, NIV). This request has been difficult for us to meet. We have found ways to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for the sick, but taking in strangers has been our most difficult Christian burden for 2,000 years. Of course, we have sought out strangers, attempting to change them by military force, missionary outreach, and education, but we rarely do we take them in. To take in strangers, we must not merely invite them into our churches, schools, and homes, but also take them into our hearts and minds. That means we have to learn their language—including the language of their soul.

I met a stranger the other day on the campus of Andrews University. He is Asian, an artist who speaks softly and with an accent. How much I wanted to ask him what he saw with his mind's eye as he sat before his canvas, and to invite him to bring me into his world of shapes and colors—to hear the language of his soul. But someone was pulling on my sleeve to get on with the business of the day.

The reason so many of us miss the gift of Jesus is that we fail to take Him into our hearts and minds. He comes to us a stranger, as one unknown, in the words of Albert Schweitzer.[5] But so it is with every gift of the stranger. We must take in the stranger with an open heart and learn his or her language to receive that gift. That may or may not mean learning a foreign language. Some strangers speak our language, but we have still not yet found a way to understand them clearly. Therefore, the best way to learn the language of a stranger, any stranger, including the Stranger, is to learn languages.

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Language study has practical uses—it enables us to do business abroad, to enrich our culture, to become effective missionaries and diplomats, to travel painlessly, and so on. But at its heart, language study is learning to welcome strangers and to receive the gifts they so generously bring. That is why language study belongs in a Christian college curriculum. It contributes to faith-based education in a fundamental way. Language study strengthens faith and makes our curriculum more religious. It belongs to the core of Christian education because it teaches us to receive the gifts of the stranger—by taking that stranger in—a prerequisite for being a follower of Jesus.

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1. Eerdmans, 2000.
2. Ibid., p. xii.
3. New York: 1991, p. xiii.
4. See Smith and Cavill, chapter 6.
5. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), p. 403.