Maureen Jameson is associate professor of French and chair of the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures in the College of Arts and Sciences. If you ask her for a 1000-word contribution to the paper, you'll get something twice that long. And then she'll complain about having her piece edited. The photo at left has been surgically enhanced.

Several years ago, the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures became the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures. Why the name change?

We changed our name to signal our focus on literatures and cultures based in the languages which evolved from Latin. "Romance," from a Late Latin word meaning "in the Roman language," refers to the popular dialects blending Latin and indigenous languages which evolved towards the end of the Roman Empire. The most successful of these dialects gradually became the modern-day languages we know as Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese. It is not unusual for them to be grouped together in a department and known by the name "Romance," which is a reminder of their common historical origin (as is an enormous base of shared vocabulary). Today the range of our scholarship and teaching extends across the regions where modern-day Romance languages are spoken.

We were able to define our focus in this way because of enrollment-driven administrative decisions to transfer other language programs (Germanic, Slavic, and Asian) to the Linguistics department. The move left many of us ambivalent: on the one hand, we are now less dispersed and can more easily define our distinctive teaching and research missions. On the other hand, we hoped that the University would invest in (re)building and maintaining strong literature and culture programs in these other languages, and we felt that we were relinquishing our last chance to influence policy in that direction. To the credit of our Germanist colleagues, the German language program has fared well since the move. An endowment funded by emeritus Professors Michael and Erika Metzger has enabled faculty in Linguistics, History, Comp Lit, and RLL to sustain an active colloquium series in German and Austrian cultural studies. But students can no longer take a concentration in German literature or study Russian or Polish literature at all, and that's a loss.

What is the focus of the department?
As is often the case in humanities departments, where we don't have "labs" devoted to a set of problems or shared "equipment," faculty research is wide-ranging, and our closest intellectual collaborators tend to be outside the institution. Current work ranges from Caribbean aesthetics and racial difference to the emergence of theatre and theatricality in early modern Europe, Latin American women dramatists, a history of the mind-body connection in modern Spanish novels, a philosophical treatment of the question of origin, a study of semantic roles, and an exploration of the use of *khipu*, or knotted strings, as narrative media in ancient Peruvian civilizations.

Our teaching mission is to train students to be fluent in at least one Romance language, knowledgeable about its literature, culture, and linguistic structures, skillful at "reading" the culture and at distinguishing "cultural" from "natural" phenomena, and increasingly aware of American culture and the English language. We strenuously encourage study abroad not only to promote mastery of the target language, but also to uproot students from the terrain of the familiar and to make the familiar strange to them. Reverse culture shock is the awakening of an enlightened citizen.

**The Modern Language Association just released a survey of U.S. institutions of higher education that found that more students are studying foreign languages than ever before and that the variety of languages being taught is greater than ever before. How does UB fare in those regards?**

The trend documented by the MLA survey is good news. But even if it continues, we will still be a nation in which only a small proportion of the native-born population can even passively comprehend any language other than English. Despite rising awareness of the cost of our insularity, I doubt that the political will or the resources can be mustered to make an adequate investment in language study. How strange it was to see news footage of American troops brandishing contraptions to their Iraqi captives, and pressing buttons to produce audible commands in Arabic. Or to read about the use of subliminal carrier technology to induce surrender. Apparently we are prepared to invest millions in hi-tech alternatives to language learning and cultural understanding, but it is freakish to think that long-term peace will be achieved by manipulating the EEGs of conquered populations. That's not peace. Americans hold paradoxical views about language learning: on the one hand, we complain that we "can't" learn a foreign language, though no one would concede the corollary that the multilingual citizens of other nations must therefore be smarter than we are. On the other hand, we nurse the fantasy of quick-fix immersion approaches to easy mastery, when in fact fluency requires years of concerted study. Almost anybody can learn another language; almost nobody can learn one fast. As someone observed recently, it is less difficult and time-consuming to produce a fighter jet pilot than to produce a soldier who is fluent in Arabic.

Sadly, UB's language enrollments declined steeply once we implemented the new SUNY-wide general education curriculum, the one that "raised standards." Our implementation of the mandate requires one year of college-level language, i.e. 101 and 102 OR a one-semester 104 intensive review course which is scarcely more than Regents training. I don't think that UB students would be receptive to a more rigorous language requirement unless they believed that their training would lead to real competence. Nevertheless, by lowering the bar, we took the wind out of the sails of high school teachers who maintain upper-level courses by arguing that
students need high-order language skills to meet college requirements. So SUNY's curriculum is a step backwards insofar as languages are concerned. For second-language competence to increase meaningfully in this country, we would have to start teaching languages in elementary school, build from one level to the next rather than re-hash the basics every blessed year, send thousands more students overseas for at least a year, and make more intelligent use of the millions of immigrants and foreign students here who could be a valuable resource for our language learners. I think UB students would welcome such a comprehensive program; they're just tired of spinning their wheels.

**Why should students study a foreign language? What's the benefit, besides being able to read a restaurant menu when traveling abroad?**

Well, it could be liberating to order something blindly, or on the recommendation of the waiter! For practical needs, it's much cheaper to buy a good dictionary and phrase-book, or even to hire a local guide. Learning a language is a tremendous investment of concentration and time, not to mention resources. Here are some of the rewards that compel that expenditure. Mastery of a second language gives students access to the myriad features of other cultures which defy translation. Familiarity with a second culture affords students a place to stand from which they can begin to observe their own culture and better understand it, and discover how the culture looks to those outside it and why it looks that way. Acquisition of a second language improves mastery of one's first language—now there's a research project for the MLA: measure competence in English as measured by grades or scores or vocabulary (or whatever) as a function of the years of study of a second language.

Study abroad is, in my opinion, the single most important feature of a college education. Students who immerse themselves in another culture, especially if they avoid circulating in herds with their friends from home, will have to and want to adapt to the society they're in. They can't resort to the models that worked back home where you could slide into the role of "jock" or "geek" or "preppie." That process of developing an identity for another society is empowering. You expand your repertoire, and at the same time discover which parts of your personality are deep and real, and which parts are conventional and superficial. You find out who you are by experimenting with being someone else.

A first result of study abroad is often a kind of estrangement from the home country, sometimes a snobbish faux sophistication. But ultimately the point of study abroad is not to learn to disparage your mother's cooking or your parents' taste in interior design. The point is that you begin to see exactly what is essential and deep and real about your own country, and which parts are conventional and superficial. I don't think you can know the United States, much less love and fight for the United States, without having some idea of what the country is and what its values are. And this is what you start to get by studying abroad.

**What is LiTgloss?**

LiTgloss is a web-based collection of texts from the world's literatures, presented in their original languages, expertly annotated so that they can be read by English-speaking students, and presented with images, sound files, and contextual information. The project was initially funded by a faculty development grant from
the Provost's office awarded under the iConnect@UB campaign, which was launched to bring teaching and learning into line with contemporary technologies. LiTgloss ([http://wings.buffalo.edu/litgloss](http://wings.buffalo.edu/litgloss)) is aimed at students whose mastery is not quite up to the task of reading complex literary works in the languages they're studying, but who will go blind if they have to spend another hour reading "See Spot Run!" stories in university classes. Reading materials in language classes have to be at the same intellectual level as what the students are reading down the hall in their history, philosophy, psychology, and English classes. We can't present literary excerpts chosen simply as examples of the use of the subjunctive. The point has to be to give students a glimpse of the intellectual and cultural wealth to which fluency in the language will give them access. LiTgloss is a work in progress; we have over a hundred texts in nearly twenty languages, and for the month of November 2003, we had just under a quarter of a million hits to the site. We're being reviewed for federal funding by two agencies, and grateful for provostal and decanal infusions which have kept us going. Volunteer contributions of textual or technical expertise are always very gratefully accepted, and it is thanks in large part to such contributions by UB students and faculty that the site has been sustained.

**How did you end up becoming a French professor?**

As I would explain it now, it was a convergence of two distinct interests. I had a tremendous curiosity for languages from my earliest childhood. When I was ten years old, Avis Car Rental launched the slogan "We try harder." The company produced white lapel buttons featuring that slogan translated into the world's languages. I was enthralled. I would plead to be taken to the airport, glide discreetly over to the Avis desk, inquire suavely about daily rates while rummaging around in the bowl for a language I didn't have yet. Once safely back in the station wagon, I'd show off the new acquisition, and we'd all marvel about places where people use such strange words to say "We try harder" ("Taimid ag deanamh an- iarracht," in Irish, was a big hit). I think my collection reached close to twenty. In grade school, I kept a notebook filled with English words which had come from Latin, which I was picking up from the Mass and the hymns we would sing in the choir at Mass every morning. Learning French and Latin in high school, finding cognates with English and discovering etymologies and morphological patterns—that was exhilarating. I visited France one summer when I was sixteen and was overwhelmed by the beauty of the country and by the constant stimulation of being in an unfamiliar place.

Admittedly there were less lofty aspects to my motivation. On the city bus going home from basketball practice, Sharon McRedmond and I would audibly disparage the other passengers in French ("Cette dame est GROSSE! HAHAAHAHA!!"). We were gleeful at this sheer wickedness, and never doubted, as we rode along in sweat pants, that our fellow Nashvillians took us to be straight from Paris. Our grade school teachers, missionary nuns from Québec on a civilizing mission to the south, used to compare notes with each other in French in front of the classroom of unruly natives. We didn't understand their words, but their sidelong glances and pursed lips portended trouble. So childhood experiences showed me that language competence determined whether you were sharing intelligence as part of the network and producing the descriptive discourse, or instead slouching on a hard seat in a crowded Metro bus being mocked by two idiot teenagers.
I grew up in an era which both focused intently on, and yet evaded, questions of morality and ethics. Segregation was widespread, and although southern Catholics were sincere in denouncing it, Catholic society was not integrated. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was popular, but admiration for Atticus Finch didn't lead to any uncomfortable speculation about whether our own society ought to change. Questions of guilt and innocence and responsibility seemed to hinge predominantly on intentions: so long as we harbored no conscious racism, we were innocent of the evils around us which, after all, we had not created. But are our "intentions" reliably accessible to our consciousness? Shouldn't we infer our "intentions" from the patterns of our behavior, rather than assert the purity of our intentions to exculpate ourselves? Could there really be unintended consequences, or might we be promoting outcomes and sustaining a status quo while hiding our own motivations from ourselves? No one in my environment talked about the capacity for self-deception as a standard human reflex, yet so many people around me seemed oblivious to the machinations of their own will. Surely this was a universal problem, and I was not exempt. Had I not managed repeatedly to throw my own conscience off the scent of what I was up to? How could notions of personal responsibility be based on something so dubious as conscious intentions? Troubled by these questions (or some version of them), I emerged from adolescence deeply suspicious of my own motives and my ability to discern them clearly. I was eager to study the human mind. I announced that I would study psychology and set off for college.

After the introductory class, intended majors were funneled into a course seductively entitled "experimental design" which proved to be stultifying. I cared nothing for standard deviations or rats on sedatives, and saw no path from the rats to the human enigma. Meanwhile, I discovered philosophy, to which I switched my major, and a semester later, the works of Marcel Proust, whose lucid understanding of human nature convinced me that the study of French literature offered me the best chance at enlightenment.

**What question do you wish I had asked, and how would you have answered it?**

I wish you had asked if I had any parting words for President Greiner, and if you had, here's what I would have said. When we go to have coffee at Starbucks, eat lunch at the Union, ride the Blue Bird, settle back in the Black Box, or wander over by the lake, the people next to us are as likely to be speaking Korean or Spanish or Arabic as they are English. Our classes are happily populated with students from Kenmore and Brooklyn and from Beijing and Hyderabad. This is the most diverse community in Western New York, and for that we have to thank many hard-working people in Admissions and International Education. But mainly we have to thank the guy who set the tone and the priorities, and who indefatigably promoted diversity not as a matter dutiful tolerance, but as a matter of incomparable wealth. That's the legacy I'll remember and the contribution I value the most from President Greiner's tenure in office.