

Nicholas McCullough  
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Personal Statement  
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One day I was visiting with relatives at my grandmother's Pebble Beach home. My aunt, being the generous person she is, brought a present for me: a massive, navy colored text documenting the history and the practices of the Japanese whaling industry. I was 11 years old at the time, so much of the book's meaningful content was wasted on me. But inside the front cover and 3 pages after that, the anatomical features of a gray whale and the tools used to hunt and harvest the massive sea mammal were diagramed in nothing but Chinese characters. I was enamored by each one's artistic yet official appearance, and struck with wonder as to how these characters conveyed ideas meaningfully. I remember stealing away from the family reminiscence, planting myself by an unoccupied coffee table— equipped with paper, a pencil, and an eraser— and copying down each character faithfully for what ended up being five hours. It wasn't until later in college that I was reunited with the same captivating characters in my first Japanese course. But even more importantly, it was around this time that I became aware of my own affinity for language.

When I mention to others that I am a student of Japanese language & culture, I am either given a stupefied look or one of admiration. Considering the intimidating reputation that precedes Japanese, I can understand why some may be under this impression. But if there is anything that I have learned from my CSUMB mentors, it is that language is unlike other subjects. Dr. Donaldo Urioste, during this fall's WLC-300 seminar, rightly asserted that language is not a skill that one picks up in a classroom: it is a culturally distinct way of framing the world that can only be acquired by using it in its appropriate context. I learned this same lessons half a year prior when I first began meeting with my Japanese tutor.

Aside from studying Japanese in college for nearly a year, I learned words, grammar points, expressions, and devoutly studied the Chinese characters in my free time. Compared to my classmates, I thought I was polyglot in-the-making. But during our first meeting, my tutor tried to engage with me in a predominantly Japanese dialogue. I was unable to respond in any meaningful way, let alone understand her instructions. For weeks this continued, and as a result, my ego deflated like a hot air balloon, and I

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landed back on earth rather painfully. For the next few months each session was a serious struggle. Then one day my tutor and I had a conversation.

“Why do you want to speak Japanese?”

I had never seriously thought about it. At that time, I did not have any particular admiration for Japanese cultural practices, nor did I desire to watch Anime or read Manga in its native tongue.

“Don’t you want to speak with Japanese people?”

As strange as it sounds, it had never crossed my mind. The interlocutors I imagined in hypothetical conversations were faceless. And there I was, in the presence of a tangible person who wished to share their culture with me. I realized then that I had treated language like a lab specimen, instead of a respectable cultural product meant to be used for the facilitation of understanding others.

When we met for our next lesson, I asked if we could try conversing in only Japanese.

“Hai, shimashou.<sup>1</sup>”

With all this in mind, my goal to use language as an essential element in a future career upon receiving my degree has not changed, but my reasoning behind this decision has certainly matured. Working as a translator/interpreter, I could serve as a conduit for necessary communication between two or more distinct social communities. With linguistic research, I could work to uncover subtle peculiarities in particular speech communities and translate my findings into knowledge that would be meaningful to both members of the scientific community and your average person. Maybe someday I’ll even have the opportunity to give back to others through teaching; after all, from what I have observed, there seems to be nothing more rewarding than guiding someone else to their own place of understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> English Translation: “Let’s do it.”