

When we started discussing the problem of what language to teach in at a French Civilization conference held in England, everyone got on edge, the whole tenor of the discussion changed: people started shouting, you felt the urgency and the desperation of their positions. I talked about Edna—my horror at feeling as though we American teachers of French only want to produce our own French fantasy, a kind of Stepford Wife, dressed as a Polytechnicienne. Is this horror just my stern Midwestern reaction? Do people in other fields have a stereotype to which they need to con-

form? (Or as Laurence Wylie put it at the conference, “Do you need an Oxford accent to study British history?”) Is this a problem about how people learn, or is it about the furtive way that academics seek their social status? Other **French** professors attending the conference responded to these questions, sensibly, by invoking the “utility” argument: we don’t have to make a fetish of **French** but we do have to teach people to function in the language; there is a basic level of functionality or utility toward which we can work. Adrian Rifkin, a British art historian and my kindred spirit in the group, responded passionately that there is no neutral “utility.” Business **French**? The esthete’s **French**, the kind they teach at the Ecole Normale? Technocrat’s **French** (Polytechnique and Sciences Po)? **Street French**, the abject argot of a Céline? The zillions of ethnic Frenches—Canadian, Cajun ones, the **French** spoken in the northern suburbs of Paris by the *beur*, the North African immigrants. When a class of Duke students tells me that the Québécois have “bad accents” I know we’ve gone wrong with our utility argument. When they say that they want to speak “just like a real **French** person,” I ask them: “Which one?”

This is a subject that touches American nerves because it touches our deep fear of not really speaking **French** that well, no matter how well we speak. While I was writing a book in **French** on Céline, the reference librarian in a major research library patiently explained to me, “here in France, our card catalogue lists books in alphabetical order.” Do we end up picking up their disdain for us and making it ours?

There is that fear and humiliation, but also the pride at struggling against American ethnocentrism and enabling our students to speak and write in a language that’s not their own.