

Tom and Me: Languages, Literature, and Science

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(I include the bit about the JRF because Tom was so chuffed that I got the job at St John's, and approved of Oxford much more after that.)

Tom the Linguist

Glad the beer is liked, yes that "Lezak" thing (which means "deckchair" in Polish but I guess it really means "laying down" i.e. "lager") is good, better than their "svetly" ("light") version. Funny how the Czechs use lighting metaphors for their beer - Staropramen means "old ray of light" and I also saw ads for Zlatopramen which presumably means "golden ray of light". I wonder what they call lightbulbs. Of course "Osram" means "I will shit (on you)" in Polish, maybe similar in Czech? So perhaps there has been some kind of linguistic reversal between things that make you shit or piss (eg beer) which are said to glow, and things that glow which are said to shit or piss. Hmmm... I wonder why?

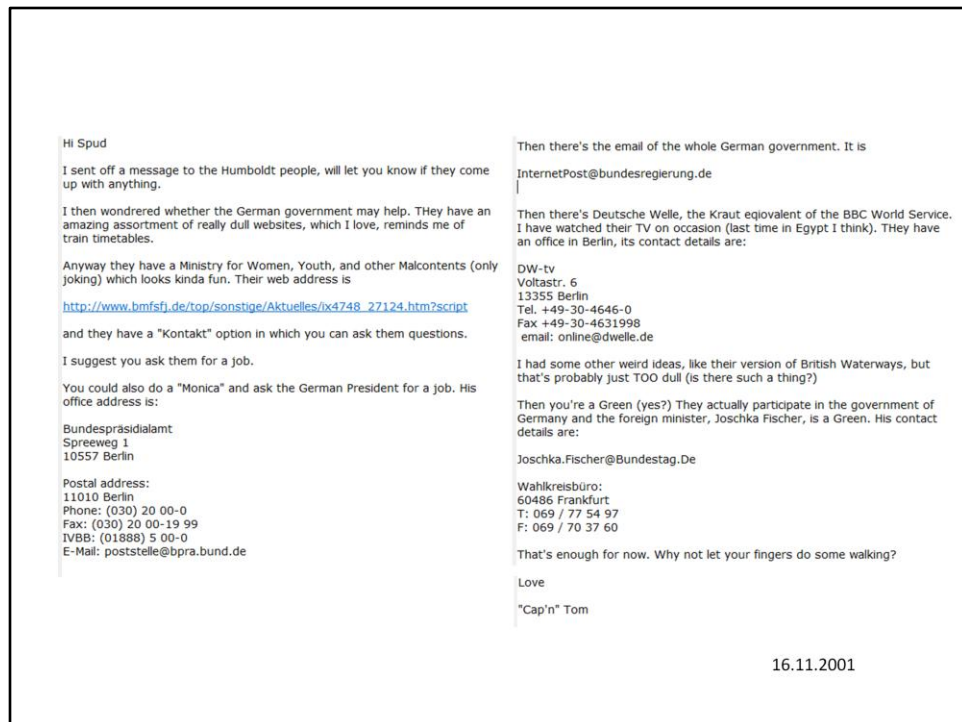
Enough of this. To work, Professor Tom. I fear there are no shots of blue hair...

Much love

xxx

18.3.2003

The two main ways in which Tom affected the course of my education and career were languages, and the interaction between literary studies and science. Tom was a brilliant linguist (even when putting on his bad Bavarian accent in German). Languages were for Tom a way of connecting with people in ways one can't when just speaking English (or just Polish or just German), and a way of getting to the heart of a country and a culture – as in this email.



And he'd always encourage me to use my languages similarly, as when I was looking for jobs in Berlin for my year abroad during my BA, and he suggested I 1) write to the Ministry for Women, Youth, and other Malcontents, or 2) ask the German President for a job (here's the email address of the whole German government) – or 3) maybe the German version of British Waterways (or on second thoughts maybe not). I don't think I ever took up any of these excellent suggestions; languages were for me, initially, mostly a way of engaging with the literatures of Europe.

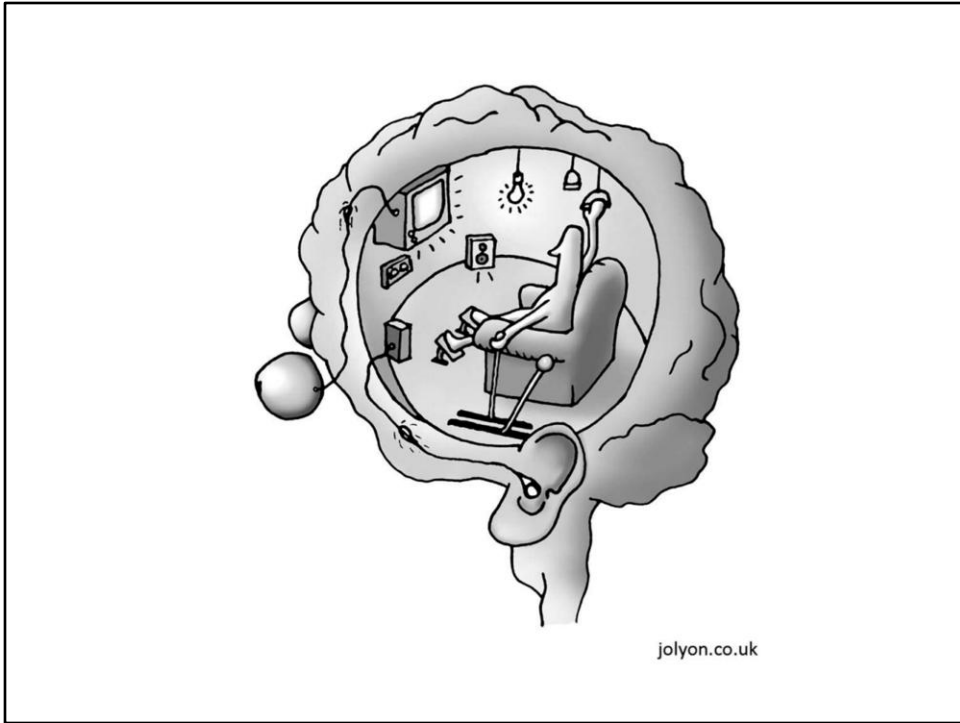
And my choice of degree subject – French and German, and, at Oxford, therefore mostly literature – was thus a move away from my family of scientists. But gradually got more and more frustrated with the traditional ways of studying literature – and their non-cumulative, sometimes introverted or deliberately obscurist nature – and started wanting to use science – and do experiments.

Models in the head?

- We make eye movements and traditional accounts of vision said that we construct a detailed model of the world in our head
- It feels to us that this is what is happening
- But then people started doing experiments...

I somehow found myself gravitating towards vision – not deliberately to follow in Tom's footsteps, but as an interest that emerged naturally out of my interest in how Kafka evokes space in his fictions. So although I haven't yet worked out how I can make the luminance and red-green Fourier spectra of fruit and leaves in Ugandan rainforests relevant to Thomas Mann, I did find there was more and more convergence with some of Tom's research areas.

I recently found online a PowerPoint presentation in which Tom presents a rather similar argument relating to film to what I've used in relation to literature: drawing on change blindness work (like Sue's and his 1995 experiment) and other arguments to dismantle the 'picture theory' of vision in order to talk about the instability and gappiness of the visual world of films (something I've also demonstrated about Kafka's fictional worlds).



His talk, like many of mine, used some of Joly's lovely illustrations...



...but he concludes his presentation (illustrating his point about classes of stimuli that are 'both pleasurable and aversive') with this lovely image – not one I've used yet, though I think I'll have to one day.

Kafka Pilot Study, December 2006

Franz Kafka, *Das Schloß*

Kapitel 1: Ankunft

Es war spät abend als K. ankam. Das Dorf lag in tiefem Schnee. Vom Schloßberg war nichts zu sehen, Nebel und Finsternis umgaben ihn, auch nicht der schwächste Lichtschein deutete das große Schloß an. Lange stand K. auf der Holzbrücke die von der Landstraße zum Dorf führt und blickte in die scheinbare Leere empor.
[...]

Chapter 1: Arrival

It was late evening when K. arrived. The village lay deep in snow. There was nothing to be seen of the castle hill, fog and darkness surrounded it, not even the faintest glimmer of light hinted at the great castle. For a long time K. stood on the wooden bridge that leads from the country road to the village and looked up into the apparent emptiness.
[...]

This is the opening paragraph of Kafka's final, unfinished novel, *Das Schloß*

On the separate paper provided, please draw as well as you can the image this passage conjures up for you.

Tom was also (along with Sue, and Adam, a very supportive third parent) an important influence in encouraging me to actually test real readers, first in a very simple experiment which he was brave enough to be among the first subjects of, and more recently in a more ambitious study on Kafka.



This is what Tom imagined when he read the opening of *The Castle*.

i'm still hugely hesitant about any one subject ever seeing both versions – but do appreciate her worry that intersubject variation is in fact much more substantial than the actual changes in the texts... any views?

Sorry, I'm a bit lost here, maybe because I have not read your detailed proposal. Both versions of what? Before and after what?

also, if i want to see what sort of manuscript changes have the greatest effect on response (i'm hypothesising the spatial/perspectival changes) i suppose it leads only to circularity if i've chosen the text myself

Text of what? Aren't you going to read them lots of text?

knowing what changes it incorporates - but there's no way of 'proving' i didn't know what changes there were, is there?

This makes no sense to me.

or would i need to give someone else a selection of viable things to choose from for me (because of course not any random swathe of text will do)? is there a standard form for such 'proofs' of lack of experimenter foreknowledge? (seems as if i'll have to get other people to do half the experiment, the way it's going...)

Nor this, really. I think I need to talk about this to you slowly and interactively.

anyway, thank you, sunday would be fine; what sort of time?

3 PM?

Tom
xxx

3.3.2008

I pestered him in what must have been a pretty tiresome way about all the things I didn't know about experimental design, and some of our email exchanges show him getting slightly frustrated with me – which is fair enough.

I worry that the subjectivity can creep in at the first encoding stage – they assert that it does not, but then don't explain how it happens, so it's sort of "magic".

26.2.2008

But he helped steer me away from the pitfalls of completely impractical methodologies (as in when people talk about methods that work seemingly by magic, and Tom saw the sleight of hand), and, no less important, let me use his office at the department for testing, as well as helping me advertise for participants. He was delighted about an eye-tracking project I've just begun with the psychology fellow at St John's, whom he also knew, of course. Collaborative work is uncommon in the humanities, but as we've heard, it was what Tom loved most about science, and was best at: getting people together to do more and better than they could have done in isolation. I want to follow his example in this regard.

If you were my student, I'd be saying that no experiment is perfect, and a successful thesis of an experimental sort should report a dozen or so experiments which get progressively better. You only know what the problems are after you've had a go. Unlike particle physics, the experiments are cheap on resources and one can afford to do lots – it's really only the experimenter's time that is involved. A PhD is meant to be an apprenticeship in learning how to do research. In the life sciences, no experiment is capable of answering the basic question except in small part. So the answer is to do loads of them. The thesis then describes the progression in knowledge and experimental skills.

But you're not my student so I would not dream of saying that to you!!!

26.2.2008

It wasn't always straightforward – as he said at one point, there are all sorts of things he would have wanted to advise if I'd been doing a psychology PhD, and if I hadn't been his daughter, but that he couldn't really insist on. But I'd hoped that, with him speaking at a conference coming up next month, in which he was going to discuss how his film work could be connected with my work on literature, we might begin a proper collaboration of some sort. Steve Hinde has kindly agreed to step in and discuss a similar topic, and perhaps he and I will be able to pursue that line of research together.



It's a shame we never got to work together closely, but I really want to try to use his presence measure in work on literature, and to continue to explore other areas of his work which I know less about. In his six minutes, Joly will be talking about how his research now overlaps with Tom's in quite different ways. I think he'd have been very happy at the thought of both his children doing research inspired in some ways by his own.



I don't want to pretend to do what I might have done if he were still here, but to try to build on what he taught me, and how he helped me to learn to love asking big questions and being confident that one could find ways of answering them.