

A Woodshed Full of French Angels: Multilingual Merton

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Lovely poem on Chagall by Raïssa Maritain in P. Van der Meer's *Rencontres*. Like to translate it in *Jubilee* with a note on her and perhaps some Chagall picture.

In any case the woodshed [the 'hermitage', St Anne's]¹ is again full of French angels the way it was the summer I read Julien Green's *Journals*. And coming back again, by the willows (going with the empty shadow of the path, after bright sun), all the angels of Montauban and of Chartres...²

July 27, 1961

If there were French angels in the woodshed with Thomas Merton that summer day, they were only momentarily displacing the other linguistically gifted angels that joined him on other days. Merton reading Raïssa Maritain in French, recalling other French authors, and thinking about France, was not unusual, for despite being a native English speaker living in a monastery in an English-speaking country, Merton's daily life involved the use of an unusually large number of languages; in the Latin of public and private prayer, in his study of writings in Latin, French, Greek, German, Spanish (and more), and in his interactions with non-English-speaking people, both correspondents and visitors.

This pattern had been set from childhood. From the earliest words of his parents in a mixed French and English, to the presentations he

1. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 71.

2. Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years* (Journals, 4; 1960-1963; ed. Victor A. Kramer, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 146 (27 July 1961).

translated from and into French in the last days of his life in Bangkok,³ Merton's world was never defined by a single language.

Merton lived for 27 years in a cloistered monastery in the Kentucky countryside. Though he expected to end his fledgling literary career when he entered the monastery, it was the beginning of the production of a remarkable volume of works, including poems, articles, lectures, and books published during his lifetime and still appearing more than 30 years later. Merton's writing had connections with foreign languages, including translations and books based on scholarship in other languages. Moreover, no one who has read more than a few Merton books would fail to note the ease with which Merton included foreign languages in his writing, not always translated – assuming, it would seem, others felt the same 'comfort of foreign languages'.⁴

Many authors have written of Merton's fluency in various languages. To a student of languages, however, 'fluent' is an imprecise term, covering a wide range of proficiency, dependent on the speaker as well as the context. Having studied several languages (Spanish and Japanese extensively), the present author was left only with questions when Merton's 'fluency' at a language was stated. It is the goal of this study, then, to clarify – to the extent possible 30 years after Merton's death – Merton's level of fluency or proficiency in all the languages he used (or mentioned), including a selection of passages by Merton or others which either assisted in the evaluation, or served to illustrate Merton's multilingual world.

The evaluation is based on the ILR scale (Interagency Language Roundtable, originally developed by the United States Foreign Service Institute).⁵ This scale, shown in the following table, includes the four major areas of language competence: the active skills of speaking and writing, and the passive skills of reading and listening. The resulting numbers, of course, do not result from actually testing Thomas Merton, but are intended to provide a relative framework for information gathered from books, articles, letters shown in the following table, interviews and surveys conducted with people who knew Merton.

3. Video recording of Merton speaking at Bangkok, Thailand (archived at the Thomas Merton Center, Louisville, KY).

4. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (Journals, 5; 1963–1965; ed. Robert E. Daggy; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 124. Merton was recalling hearing many languages spoken on the streets of New York, where he had travelled to meet Zen teacher Daisetz Suzuki (10 July 1964).

5. Alice C. Omaggio, *Teaching Language in Context: Proficiency-Oriented Instruction* (Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers, Inc., 1986), pp. 11–19.

Table 1. *Language Proficiency Levels*

	<i>Proficiency Level</i>	<i>Definition</i>
0	(No Proficiency)	Unable to use the language, or at best knows a few memorized words and phrases.
1	Elementary proficiency	Able to satisfy most survival needs and some limited courtesy/social demands.
2	Limited working proficiency	Able to satisfy most routine social demands, work requirements, and shows some ability to communicate on concrete topics.
3	Professional working proficiency	Able to use the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate in most formal and informal conversations.
4	Full professional proficiency	Able to use and understand the language with a great deal of fluency, grammatical accuracy, and precision of vocabulary and idioms.
5	Native or bilingual proficiency	Able to use the language like an educated native speaker.

Moving from one level of proficiency to the next takes relatively little time at the earlier stages, but movement to each successive level requires progressively increasing amounts of time. Few attain Level 5 and, informally, most people would consider a person at Level 4, or even Level 3, as 'fluent'. Merton's proficiency in several languages will fall in these three levels, but the scale will permit a more nuanced comparison.

There are some languages that Merton could read very well, but the other skills (i.e. writing, speaking) were much less well developed. In these cases, the rating was based on the most advanced skill, noting the limitation. Where a more definite rating was difficult, an intermediate rating was given (such as German, rating 2-3).

After beginning with English, the rest of the languages are listed by Merton's proficiency, from least to greatest. Where several languages have the same rating, they are in alphabetical order. Following the language listing are a few observations on Merton and languages. Note that 'macaronic language' is mentioned but not rated, as it is not a language, but a literary device.⁶

6. Macaronic language is a deliberate mixture of languages. Merton used it playfully in letters to friends, in his early novel *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (New York: New Directions, 1975), and in the poem *Mens Sana in Corpore Sano: Macaronic Lyric* (1941), published in Patrick F. O'Connell, "And Called it Macaronic":

*English**Rating: 5*

English was Merton's mother tongue, so the '5' rating does not come as a surprise, but Merton's facility at learning foreign languages also was evidenced in his facility with English dialects and accents. At the age of 18, he had an early awareness of accents in a self-description; 'Accent: varies with the company he is with and the area he is in'.⁷ Much later he recalled his childhood in several countries, having 'had my own very small share of being beyond the pale in various societies – foreigner in French and English schools and so on... I was always able to develop the right accent and the right protective feathers in a few months'.⁸ When he moved from England to New York, his British accent faded in short order.⁹ His acquired American accent was authentic enough that Bob Gibney told the story of their conversation with a British sailor in which Merton quickly revived an English accent, moreover a Cockney accent, at that.¹⁰

*Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit**Rating: 0*

In 1961, not long after his first contact with Sufi correspondent Abdul Aziz, Merton told James Laughlin he had an '...awful urge to study Sanskrit and then Persian... Yah, it is probably crazy. I will never have the time'.¹¹ Four years later, Merton told Laughlin that now Aziz was trying to persuade him to learn Arabic, but that without an instructor in the picture, it would probably be as unsuccessful as his attempt to learn Russian.¹² There are several other times he mentions the desire to learn other 'Oriental' languages, knowing it would probably never happen.¹³

An Unpublished Early Poem of Thomas Merton', *Merton Seasonal* 21.1 (Spring 1996), pp. 7-8.

7. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 71.

8. In a letter to Gloria Sylvester Bennett dated 19 January 1967 (*The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends* [ed. Robert E. Daggy; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989], p. 345).

9. Paul Wilkes (ed.), *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 16.

10. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 146.

11. David D. Cooper (ed.), *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 164.

12. Cooper (ed.), *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin*, p. 258.

13. R.D. Baker and Gray Henry (eds.), *Merton and Sufism, The Untold Story: A Complete Compendium* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), p. 127.

The translations from the Persian which are included in *Collected Poems* were, like his Chinese translations, not done directly from the original language, but using one or more French and or English translations, combined with Merton's own poetic intuition.¹⁴

Chinese

Rating: 0

Merton began to study Chinese in 1962, and was introduced to the structure of the Chinese dictionary. He learned a few characters, which he was able to use in teaching Chinese philosophy to the novices.¹⁵ A sample of Merton's Chinese has been reproduced in *Turning toward the World*; a respectable and readable beginner's effort.¹⁶ There is also a recording of Merton teaching his novices Chinese philosophy. The sound of chalk on blackboard can be heard, and from his spoken description, it is clear he has written Chinese characters for them.¹⁷

However well begun the effort, Merton did not continue his Chinese studies, and remarked in a letter, 'Someone tried to tell me you could learn Chinese in six weeks. Ha...'¹⁸

Merton described *The Way of Chuang Tzu* not as a translation, but as a 'rendering', based on his comparison of other translations, in consultation with John C.H. Wu.¹⁹ Although it was a translation, he felt this was one of his best efforts, as reflected in a chart he made later to rate the relative quality of his own books. *The Way of Chuang Tzu* earned a 'better' rating, high praise given that he rated nothing at the highest level, 'best'.²⁰

Esperanto

Rating: 0

Merton's acquaintance with the invented language Esperanto²¹ seems to have been brief. In a review of *My Argument with the Gestapo* for any

14. Baker and Henry (eds.), *Merton and Sufism*, pp. 119, 287.

15. Thomas Merton, audiotope, *The Fully Human Being* (Kansas City: Credence Cassettes, 1995).

16. Merton, *Turning toward the World*, p. 19.

17. Merton, *The Fully Human Being*.

18. In a letter to Patrick Hart, 19 June 1966 (Patrick Hart [ed.], *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction* [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990], p. 306).

19. In a letter to Aunt Kit (*The Road to Joy*, p. 70).

20. James H. Forest, *Thomas Merton: A Pictorial Biography* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 65.

21. Esperanto was invented in 1887 by Polish oculist Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof,

evidence that Merton knew Esperanto, extended passages containing multiple languages (including, in addition to English, Latin, French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, and possibly Esperanto) do exist. The word '*esperanto*' (or '*esperantu*') itself appears about as frequently as the words which are possibly Esperanto, and it appears that Merton wanted to give the impression that Esperanto was part of the macaronic language assemblage, rather than actually knowing it.

Here, Madame Gongora, 'well known to almost everybody in London', discusses what the author is up to, in Spanish, French, English, Italian, and the mention, at least, of Esperanto: '*Y escript quoi che placer tu mismo, hey, garzoni? Escrip dialectico personal, sin umbrages di folor realist? Escrip su proprio esperantu. Bono. Bono. Je vous aime, artisto*'.²²

Hebrew

Rating: 0

Merton never studied Hebrew, although fairly early in his monastic career (1949) he ruefully quoted a theologian who recommended a daily practice of an hour of the Greek New Testament in the morning, and the Hebrew Old Testament in the evening, 'This makes me hang my head considerably'.²³

Japanese

Rating: 0

In 1966, Merton told a correspondent that if he were 'young enough to tackle a new language' it would probably be Japanese,²⁴ and he did report purchasing a book of Japanese phrases to take to Asia, but there is no further mention of Merton studying Japanese.²⁵

using the pseudonym Doktoro Esperanto ('Doctor Hopeful'), intended to be an international language. (David Crystal [ed.], *An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Language and Languages* [Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1992], p. 125).

22. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, p. 48. Roughly translated, 'And do you like what I am writing, hey, young lady? I write in a personal dialect, without being hindered by realism. I write in your own Esperanto. Good. Good. I love you, artist'.

23. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953), p. 213.

24. Hart (*The School of Charity*, p. 306, 19 June 1966).

25. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (Journals, 7; 1967-1968; ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 143.

Russian

Rating: 0

Although their correspondence was in English,²⁶ Merton told Boris Pasternak that he wanted to learn Russian, in order to read Russian literature in the original.²⁷ He was optimistic at first, writing to James Laughlin, 'I am still at the stage where Ivan Ivanovitch works without rest all day in the factory. And other such things—'At our club we have a real fine radio'. Have you any simple Russian reading? ... I'll be in a position to read simple prose in a week or two, I think'.²⁸ However, his early enthusiasm could not compete with other demands on his time, and the effort was not long pursued.²⁹ Future Merton scholars might regret this as well, as Merton reported that writing in Cyrillic was improving his handwriting.³⁰

Catalan

Rating: 2 (Reading Only)

Although Merton was born in French Catalonia, and even identified himself as a Catalan of sorts to a publisher seeking permission for a Catalan translation,³¹ he never actually studied Catalan. However, Catalan is closely related to both French and Spanish, Merton's two strongest modern languages. Thus it is not surprising that he reported he was enjoying reading Catalan in a letter to a correspondent in 1967,³² and in the same year asked to be lent a Catalan dictionary.³³

26. Naomi Burton Stone and Lydia Pasternak Slater (eds.), *Pasternak/Merton: Six Letters* (Lexington: King Library Press, 1973), p. v.

27. In a letter to Boris Pasternak, 22 August 1958 (in *idem, The Courage for Truth, Letters to Writers* [ed. Christine M. Bochen; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993], p. 87).

28. Cooper (ed.), *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin*, p. 138.

29. In an interview with Fr Chrysogonus Waddell, 18 February 2000.

30. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Vocation* (Journals, 3; 1952–1960; ed. Lawrence Cunningham; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 248 (17 January 1959).

31. Thomas Merton, 'Honorable Reader: Reflections on my Work' (ed. Robert E. Daggy; New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 33.

32. In a letter to Louis Zukofsky, 18 July 1967 (Thomas Merton Center).

33. Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Father Louie: Photographs of Thomas Merton* (New York: Timken Publishers, 1991), p. 27.

*Greek**Rating: 2*

Merton had no knowledge of contemporary Greek,³⁴ and was never confident with classical Greek. Although he studied classical Greek at Oakham (prior to college), Merton later regretted his lack of zeal then. 'I could use some Greek now. I would like to read the Greek Fathers in the original. The best I can do is find my way in the New Testament'.³⁵ His translation from the Greek, *Clement of Alexandria: Selections from the Protreptikos*, was done with 'much help from the new French version'.³⁶

Despite this lack of confidence in his own proficiency, Merton did not abandon Greek. In 1965, he described being re-energized to read the Greek New Testament, inspired by the arrival of a 'lovely Byzantine ikon'.³⁷ The final evidence of Merton's valuation of Greek was a card among the personal possessions returned to the Abbey after his death, with a passage from the *Philokalia* in Merton's own distinctive handwriting, in Greek.³⁸

*Provençal**Rating: 2 (Reading Only)*

Merton never formally studied Provençal, and one might be justified in reading a little surprise into these lines from a letter to his old friend Bob Lax: 'I can read Provençal fairly easily, and have been finding out Provençal poetry is just as fine as they all say! ... The sound of the language itself is wonderful – adjectives and particles ending in -etz and -atz ... I found out I could read more Provençal than just those lines in Dante, because I got a big Provençal book with convenient French translations

34. Thomas Merton, audiotope, *Mary: Light and Temple* (Kansas City: Credence Cassettes, n.d.).

35. William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) p. 61.

36. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), p. 190.

37. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 321 (3 December 1965).

38. Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 181. The passage is from John Carpathios, 'If we wish to please the true God and to be friends with the most blessed of friendships, let us present our spirit naked to God. Let us not draw into anything of this present world – no art, no thought, no reasoning, no self-justification – even though we should possess all the wisdom of the world'.

handy and it was okay easy that way, and well, I didn't need a translation for EVERY line'.³⁹

German

Rating: 2–3

Merton's German was stronger than he generally admitted. Surprisingly, he began his German studies in France at Montauban,⁴⁰ and continued with it in England and the United States. Perhaps because of the ease with which he learned the Romance languages (French, Spanish, etc.), the additional work required for German did not seem to him to be equally rewarded. Father Chrysogonus Waddell commented in an interview conducted by Victor Kramer that, 'He knew German, but it just wasn't his language. He felt impatient with it because it just didn't come that spontaneously'.⁴¹

From two recordings of Merton's conferences to his novices where he read from Rilke's poetry in the original language, a native speaker of German evaluated Merton's spoken German as understandable, but with a strong American accent.⁴² Although the recording is not dated, it would have been at least 20–25 years since Merton had studied German.

There are numerous self-deprecating comments in his letters about his difficulties with German, but Merton occasionally exceeded his own expectations. 'I am beginning to be glad I learned (barely) to read German in school... The perfect language for an existential theology... Things can be *discovered* in German, that can be perhaps reproduced afterwards in other languages'.⁴³ To those who know Merton's love for Rilke, it will come as no surprise that it is while reading Rilke that he came to realize, 'I really know more German than I think, maybe... My own guesses will be better for me than the translation'.⁴⁴

39. Merton, *The Road to Joy*, p. 147 (21 August 1939).

40. Thomas Merton, 'Monsieur Delmas', in Morris L. Ernst (ed.), *The Teacher* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 49.

41. Victor A. Kramer, 'Truly Seeking God...in Christ', *The Merton Annual* 11, pp. 148-73 (151).

42. Thomas Merton, audiotapes, *Poetry and Imagination* (n.d.), and *Natural Contemplation* (1988), (Kansas City: Credence Cassettes). Evaluated by Hermann Goeppele of Seattle, Washington, born near Nuremberg, and still frequently returning to Germany.

43. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 91 (19 March 1964).

44. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (Journals, 6; 1966–1967; ed. Christine M. Bochen; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 7 (16 January 1966).

Italian

Rating: 3–4

Merton's characteristic modesty concerning his language abilities is well illustrated in a letter to Roberto Gri, a young Italian student, which begins with Merton modestly claiming he has forgotten all the Italian he ever knew – yet the disclaimer is in Italian!⁴⁵ However little confidence Merton had in his written Italian, his spoken Italian approached some degree of fluency. When Msgr Larraona, then secretary of the Sacred Congregation of the Religious, came to Gethsemani, Merton interpreted a talk. He later wrote that his visitor to the monastery 'said some wonderful things. But I especially liked the way in which he said them. Italian is a wonderful language to preach in'.⁴⁶ To Merton's contemporary Brother Patrick Hart, Merton seemed to translate easily from Italian, but it is well to note his further comment, 'Some monks said his translations were more interesting than the original!'⁴⁷ Merton may have been more interested in communicating ideas than making literal translations.

Merton's Italian education was solid. Italian was not yet offered at Oakham, but arrangements were made for Merton to study it independently (along with French and German).⁴⁸ It began with the purchase of a copy of *Hugo's Italian Self-Taught*. He brought it to the hospital where his father lay gravely ill, opening it in the waiting-room to teach himself a few verbs while waiting to visit his father.⁴⁹ Merton soon moved beyond verbs, and advanced to 'Italian novels, if I could get them, and going through the *Oxford Book of Italian Verse*'.⁵⁰ Merton's strength in Italian helped him win a scholarship to Cambridge's Clare College, and although the memory of his misbehavior outside of class haunted him for

45. Merton, *The Road to Joy*, p. 334. '... ho completamente dimenticato tutto che sapeva'. (10 December 1964).

46. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 10. The passage goes on to mention Merton had two conferences with Msgr Larraona in Spanish, Larraona's native language (23 August 1952).

47. In an interview with Brother Patrick Hart (16 December 2000).

48. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 56.

49. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Fiftieth Anniversary edn; New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1998), p. 90. Nine years later, again in a hospital, he reports reading all of Dante's *Paradisio*, in Italian, while recovering from an appendectomy (p. 303).

50. Thomas Merton, *Fitzgerald File*, unpublished manuscript, Thomas Merton Center, n.p.

the rest of his life, he wrote that reading Dante 'was the one great benefit I got out of Cambridge'.⁵¹

Merton's journals mention books that he is reading in Italian, never accompanied by any complaints about their difficulty. His Lenten reading in 1963 was *The History of Italian Monasticism*, 'in Italian, pleasantly illustrated',⁵² and as late as December 24, 1967, Merton recorded reading an 'appalling' article in Italian on 'The Monk in the Church'.⁵³

Portuguese

Rating: 3-4 (Primarily Reading)

According to his Portuguese friend and translator Sr Maria Emmanuel de Souza e Silva, Merton was able to read 'very complex poetry in Portuguese'.⁵⁴ She additionally confirmed that their correspondence, while conducted in English, occasionally included untranslated Portuguese, with Merton writing occasional words and phrases, Sr Emmanuel writing longer passages. Merton's own evaluation of his Portuguese reading ability appeared in a letter, interestingly enough in French, '*Si vous voulez m'ecrire en portuguais, je le lis facilement*'.⁵⁵ ('If you want to write to me in Portuguese, I read it easily.') Also, to Alceu Amoroso Lima he wrote, 'Do not apologize for writing to me in Portuguese ... I enjoy very much reading it'.⁵⁶ This however did not equate to an easy proficiency, for to another correspondent Merton wrote about a Portuguese book, 'which I have not yet read, I am ashamed to say – and I fear it would take too long in Portuguese'.⁵⁷

Merton commented on his own Portuguese writing ability, 'It would probably be impossible for me to write it very coherently',⁵⁸ and he apparently spoke even less; Alceu Amoroso Lima Filho (son of Alceu Amoroso Lima), who visited Merton in 1960, did not hear Merton speak any Portuguese during the visit.⁵⁹

51. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 135.

52. Merton, *Turning toward the World*, p. 301.

53. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 30.

54. In a survey returned from Sr Maria Emmanuel de Souza e Silva to the author, 31 July 2000.

55. In a letter to an unnamed Sister, Thomas Merton Center (14 November 1966).

56. In a letter to Alceu Amoroso Lima (*The Courage for Truth*, p. 164, November 1961).

57. In a letter to Sr Emmanuel de Sousa e Silva, 30 October 1967 (Thomas Merton Center).

58. Lima (*The Courage for Truth*, p. 164, November 1961).

59. Alceu Amoroso Lima Filho, letter to the author, 3 July 2000.

Although Merton did not study Portuguese until nearly 20 years after his visit to the 1939 World's Fair, he had sufficient consciousness of the language to report his surprise at its pronunciation, when listening to a Portuguese lesson at the Linguaphone booth. '[I] found out things I didn't believe...they pride themselves on pronouncing everything the way it is spelt, and so do the Hungarians; [yet] in neither language can I find that the pronunciation has anything to do with the spelling... Amusing dipped effects in Portuguese where the 'e' is dropped out'.⁶⁰

At Gethsemani, Merton learned Portuguese from Fr Bede Kok (a fellow multilinguist originally from Denmark via Brazil⁶¹) in 1958⁶² and for a while reserved an hour a week on Portuguese for the sake of the translations of Brazilian poets.⁶³

With characteristic enthusiasm, Merton writes of his affection for Portuguese in 1961, 'It is a language I delight in, and it is really the one I like best. It is a warm and glowing language, one of the most human of tongues, richly expressive and in its own way innocent... it seems to me that Portuguese has never yet been used for such barbarities as German, English, French, or Spanish...'⁶⁴

Spanish

Rating: 4–5

Merton's competence in Spanish was second only to his fluency in French. Merton did not begin his study of Spanish until the summer term of his first year at Columbia,⁶⁵ but this late start proved to be no handicap. When he visited Cuba almost five years later, he seemed to revel in using his Spanish: 'I made friends with about fifty-one people of all ages. The evening ended up with me making a big speech in broken Spanish... all about faith and morals... I heard someone say, '*¿Es católico, ese Americano?*' 'Man', said the other, 'he is a catholic and a very good catholic', and the tone in which he said this made me so happy that I could not sleep'.⁶⁶ Merton's religious experience mediated by the Spanish language coincided again at Our Lady of Cobre, where the

60. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (Journals, 1; 1939–1945; ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) p. 57.

61. Hart interview (16 December 2000).

62. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 213 (17 August 1958).

63. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 324.

64. Lima, November 1961 (*The Courage for Truth*, p. 164).

65. Transcript of Thomas Merton, Columbia University, in the Abbey of Gethsemani. The class was in 1935.

66. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 307.

words sung by a choir of children, '*Creo en Diós*'⁶⁷ (I believe in God), evoked a vision of God's presence in the Eucharist, so vivid as to seem to 'lift me clean up off the earth'.⁶⁸

While in Cuba, Merton would sometimes attend Mass at more than one church, and wrote characteristically of the excellence of Spanish:

I would listen to the harmonious sermons of the Spanish priests, their very grammar of which was full of dignity and mysticism and courtesy. After Latin, it seems to me there is no language so fitted for prayer and for talk about God as Spanish: for it is a language at once strong and supple, it has its sharpness, it has the quality of steel in it, which gives it the accuracy that true mysticism needs, and yet it is soft, too, and gentle and pliant, which devotion needs, and it is courteous and suppliant and courtly, and it lends itself surprisingly little to sentimentality. It has some of the intellectuality of French but not the coldness that intellectuality gets in French: and it never overflows into the feminine melodies of Italian. Spanish is never a weak language, never sloppy...⁶⁹

Traveling alone, as he had in his earlier European travels to France, Germany, and Italy, Merton immersed himself in the language and culture of Cuba, and observed his own progress in Spanish. Listening to a flamenco singer, he reported, 'For the first time I was able to understand the words of the song all the way through, and what poems! Baby...'⁷⁰ The few weeks (no more than six)⁷¹ in Cuba marked Merton's Spanish, years later. Fr Chrysogonus Waddell recounted hearing Merton being asked where he got his Spanish accent, and Merton replied, almost as though he were embarrassed, '*En Cuba*' (in Cuba).⁷² Perhaps it was the intensity of his experiences there that marked his accent after such a short time.

While not as closely associated with Cistercian history as French and Latin, Merton's own interest in Spanish and Latin American literature — starting with St John of the Cross — ensured that Spanish became a major language in his monastic life. While studying St John, he referred to both English and Spanish texts, making corrections to the Spanish text where needed. He edited Spanish translations of his own works, and wrote to a

67. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 310, but '*Yo Creo*' (I believe) in Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 151, and Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 217.

68. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 218 (29 April 1940).

69. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 306. The passage ends in a phrase not generally considered offensive when written half a century ago, '...even on the lips of a woman'.

70. In a letter to Bob Lax (*The Road to Joy*, p. 155, April 1940).

71. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 149, 152.

72. Waddell interview (18 February 2000).

correspondent, 'I often like my stuff better when it comes out in Spanish'.⁷³

Merton spoke Spanish, even including spiritual direction, with Ernesto Cardenal, and other Spanish-speaking novices at Gethsemani.⁷⁴ Merton was also called to interpret for Spanish-speaking visitors to the monastery ranging from church dignitaries to prospective monks.

There are at least a dozen letters in the archives of the Merton Center at Bellarmine University that Merton wrote in Spanish, all or in part, testifying to his proficiency. While often lacking the accents which are part of Spanish (for the reasons described in the section below on French), Merton's Spanish correspondents do not complain about his orthography or his grammar. Still, he modestly writes, 'It always takes a little effort to get wound up to write in Spanish'.⁷⁵ He advised another correspondent, 'It would be easier to write in English if you could read it', but apparently she could not, and subsequent letters continue in Spanish.⁷⁶

French

Rating: 5

Although there were several other languages at which Merton achieved a level of fluency, his French was superb and approached native fluency. He could speak standard French, but also with the accent of Toulouse, including making jokes in that dialect.⁷⁷ A native speaker of French who spoke on the telephone with Merton would not have heard a foreign accent, according to Sr Myriam Dardenne.⁷⁸

Merton's formal studies in French began at the age of ten, where he suffered the indignity of being placed with much younger boys in an ordinary French school, and was accordingly well motivated to improve his French quickly. This was a success; a teacher at St Antonin reported that Merton was 'the best student he ever had in French. He got the best grades'.⁷⁹ By the time he transferred to the Lycée Ingres in Montauban

73. In a letter to Mery-Lu Sananes and Jaime Lopes-Sanz (*The Road to Joy*, p. 338, 7 March 1966).

74. In a letter to Sr Therese Lentfoehr (*The Road to Joy*, p. 222, 21 February 1956).

75. Cooper (ed.), *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin*, p. 331.

76. In a letter to Sr Victorias, 18 July 1965 (Thomas Merton Center).

77. Waddell interview (18 February 2000).

78. In an interview with Sr Myriam Dardenne (9 June 2001). Sr Myriam was superior at the Trappistine monastery in California when Merton visited. She and several other sisters had come from Belgium to found the new monastery.

79. Wilkes (ed.), *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best*, p. 78.

(near Toulouse), Merton had already begun writing his first novels; profusely illustrated adventure stories in French.⁸⁰ Three years later he left France forever, although he continued his French studies in England and the United States.

Merton was known for his French language ability, and was referred to as the 'French monk' on at least one occasion.⁸¹ From early in his monastic career, he was called to provide interpretation for French (and other) guests,⁸² as well as translations of French (and Latin) language materials.⁸³

Merton also used French as a bridge to other languages and cultures, reading translations from Chinese, Persian, Arabic, and so on, sometimes more accessible in French translations than English. Later, he used French as a bridge in the opposite direction, from those languages into English, most often for poetry. It was in French that he began his studies of Asia, as early as the winter of 1937–1938, when he 'sat for hours, with the big quarto volumes of the Jesuit Father Wieger's French translations of hundreds of Oriental texts'.⁸⁴

Merton routinely corrected the printer's proofs of the French translations of his works.⁸⁵ He also wrote poetry and prose in French, including articles which were published in French magazines and journals.⁸⁶ It took some effort: 'Did a little work on the book about Abbé Monchanin — which I am supposed to review (have been dragging my feet because this review is supposed to be in French)'.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, Fr Charles Dumont, editor of *Collectanea Cisterciana*, wrote to Merton in 1964, 'Apart from one or two mistakes, your French is still very good, even from a literary point of view. Please do send more of this excellent stuff'.⁸⁸

Written French and Spanish both require diacritics (accents, tildes, etc.), and Merton's handwritten letters in these languages were properly written. However, for three reasons, typewritten letters in both languages

80. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 58.

81. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 331. This was when Merton was asking for permission to transfer to Cuernavaca.

82. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 233.

83. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision*, p. 30.

84. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 205.

85. After working on the French translation of his autobiography, he mused, 'It seemed completely alien, the work of a man I never even heard of' (Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 328).

86. Baker and Henry (eds.), *Merton and Sufism*, p. 239.

87. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 4.

88. In a letter from Charles Dumont, 13 November 1964 (Thomas Merton Center). Capitalization of 'French' is corrected in the quotation.

rarely exhibit these marks. First was the element of time. Several who knew Merton and were interviewed in the *Thomas Merton Oral History* remarked on the speed at which he worked, seldom going back to make corrections of any kind.⁸⁹ Second, none of the typists knew French very well.⁹⁰ Third, only rarely did he or his typists have access to a proper typewriter. Once, at the arrival of a properly equipped machine, he wrote to James Laughlin (publisher and friend), 'I picked the keys myself to get some French accents in case I should some day order a ton of *pâte de foie gras*, or *boeuf rôti* or even a dozen bottles of *kümmel*. Really it is for letters to foreign brass, of course'.⁹¹ Merton knew these missing accents and marks were a problem; he referred to letters without them as 'very poor copy' in a letter to Dumont.⁹²

Even in his final trip, the journey to Asia, Merton used French. Most interestingly, there is videotape in the Thomas Merton Center recording him speaking both English and French at the Bangkok conference. Merton switches easily between languages, although in French there are more pauses between phrases. Merton had not been an official translator at the conference, but served when requested, and one participant recalled, 'Father Merton translated with so natural a skill that one was hardly aware of his brilliance in reproducing from memory long passages of Dom de Floriss' remarks'.⁹³ So, at the end of his life as at the first, Merton's world was multilingual.⁹⁴

Latin

Rating: 5 (given the dearth of native speakers)

Merton used Latin on a daily basis for prayer and study, and his monastic brothers characterized his proficiency highly, 'He really knew Latin',⁹⁵ and 'He seemed to move easily through the language of St Augustine, John Cassian, St Bernard, and St Thomas'.⁹⁶

89. *Thomas Merton Oral History* (ed. Victor Kramer; Decatur, GA: Deweylands Press, 1985), pp. 5, 8, 246.

90. In a letter from Dumont, Holy Saturday, 1964 (Thomas Merton Center).

91. Cooper (ed.), *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin*, p. 153.

92. In a letter from Dumont, 27 May 1966 (Thomas Merton Center).

93. *The Catholic World* 209 (July 1969), pp. 160-63.

94. And although the last person he spoke to was Belgian Fr François de Grunne, a French speaker, that conversation was not in French. When they first met, Thomas Merton 'presented himself under the name, Frère Louis, with the kindest of smiles. If not, we always spoke English, and it was a delight to listen to his musical voice'. Fr François de Grunne, OSB, letter to the author, December 2000.

95. Waddell interview, (18 February 2000).

96. In a letter from Fr Felix Donohoe to the author (26 June 2000).

His first studies were classical Latin in England, starting at Ripley Court at a remedial level with younger boys, continuing at Oakham School. Available transcripts show no Latin college classes, although by the time he was at Columbia University, he earned pocket money as a Latin tutor.⁹⁷ After he completed his Master's degree at Columbia and began teaching English literature at St Bonaventure University, Merton began to read Latin again, consulting with Fr Philotheus Boehner⁹⁸ as needed.⁹⁹ On Merton's first visit to Gethsemani Abbey, he astonished the guestmaster by asking for a copy of the letters of St Bernard in Latin from the library – it was the guestmaster's first request for a book from a retreatant, much less one in Latin.¹⁰⁰

It is important to note that the Latin which Merton began to study independently after Columbia and subsequently used at Gethsemani was not classical Latin, but medieval Latin. Most students of medieval Latin, like Merton, start with a firm classical Latin foundation, subsequently learning additional vocabulary and syntax, which vary through time and region.

Latin permeated Merton's life in the monastery, both privately and publicly. For most of his monastic life, the Mass and community prayers were in Latin. Merton loved the Latin liturgy, and he was not pleased with the change to English. However, living in the hermitage allowed him to continue to say his prayers in Latin. 'Down in the monastery they now have English vigils. I cling to the Latin. I need the continuity!'¹⁰¹ He celebrated the Eucharist in Latin whenever possible, and had a deep personal relation to the Vulgate, even though it was considered technically inferior to more recent translations.¹⁰²

Although there is no evidence of extended Latin texts written by Merton, there is at least one poem in Latin which he wrote for Victor Hammer.¹⁰³ Merton also followed the example of St John of the Cross, writing short phrases in Latin, giving them to the young monks as texts

97. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 235.

98. Thomas T. Spencer, "Tom's Guardian Angels': Merton's Franciscan Mentors', *Merton Seasonal* 26.2 (Summer 2001), p. 17.

99. Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, p. 113.

100. *Thomas Merton Oral History*, p. 259. The guestmaster was Fr Joachim Tierney.

101. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 60 (29 February 1968).

102. *The Legacy of Thomas Merton* (ed. Patrick Hart; Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1986), p. 221.

103. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 1005.

for meditation.¹⁰⁴ His translations from Latin include *The Wisdom of the Desert*.¹⁰⁵

Here ends the listing of individual languages. One might have noticed that all the languages listed in which he made any real progress are all Western languages, and those at which he excelled were Romance languages – Latin and languages descended from Latin. Having first learned French, Merton benefited not only from his own affinity for language learning but also the affinities among the other Romance languages he encountered. While modern Romance languages in general have a high level of lexical overlap, about 40 per cent cognancy for a standard 100-word list, some languages are even closer. For French and Spanish, cognancy is 65%, and for Spanish and Portuguese, 90 per cent.¹⁰⁶

It is not necessary here to discuss how Merton's linguistic gifts affected his life; all his biographers have noted this to varying degrees. He occasionally discussed this as well, and there is a revealing passage in his private journal which gives yet another motivation for his passion for languages as well as knowledge in general: 'I realize I have pushed too far...reading too widely about everything, trying to write too much again, trying to set myself up as an authority on everything in my own imagination'.¹⁰⁷ However, Merton's face to the world about his language skills was typically humble. There are passages in his letters in French (and others in Spanish) where he apologized, '*Cette lettre n'est pas un chef d'oeuvre de français, mais vous me comprenez*'¹⁰⁸ ('This letter is no masterpiece of French, but you will understand').

Even some of Merton's deepest spiritual experiences were multilingual, including the '*Creo en Diós!*' experience in Cuba mentioned above; the realization at Polonnaruwa in then Ceylon, 'The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with *dharmakaya* – everything is emptiness and everything is compassion';¹⁰⁹ and the famous 'Fourth and Walnut' experience

104. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision*, p. 40.

105. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960).

106. Bernard Comrie (ed.), *The World's Major Languages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 206.

107. Merton, *Turning toward the World*, p. 22 (19 July 1960). The passage continues, 'Slow down! Don't expect to learn Chinese all of a sudden! Still, I think I will write that article on Chinese thought'. In the space of a few sentences he develops a self-criticism, processes it and decides to keep on doing it anyway!

108. In a letter to Dumont, 18 June 1965 (Thomas Merton Center). The original typed letter lacks diacritics (*français* vs. *français*) and must have been typed on a typewriter without French accents and symbols.

109. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 323 (4 December 1968).

where the wall between the world and the monastery vanishes, and Merton sees at the center of the hearts of the human race '*le point vierge* (I cannot translate it)...the pure glory of God in us'.¹¹⁰

Merton spent most of his life in a multilingual world, from his birth in a Catalan-speaking area of France to his death in Thailand at an international monastic conference. Early successes in French, Italian, and German first led him to consider a career in the English diplomatic service,¹¹¹ or perhaps to life as a journalist, working up to what seemed to be the prestigious position of foreign correspondent.¹¹² Yet, though his adult life was ultimately spent within the confines of a monastery, Merton's life journey, facilitated by his multilingual abilities, was paradoxically most far-reaching when he stayed in one place. Ironically, when he finally achieved his dream of world travel, his life suddenly ended.

From his virtuosity in French, Latin and Spanish, to his competence in German, Greek, Italian and Portuguese and his acquaintance with Catalan, Chinese, Provençal, Russian and other languages; it would be impossible to strip the influence and actual appearance of foreign languages from Merton's thinking and his writing. And yet while multilingual ability is not a requirement for a writer and spiritual teacher, this ability was surely one of Merton's great gifts.

110. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 158.

111. Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, p. 53.

112. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 69.