

An Englishman in Brussels: The Significance of French Language in Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*

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The purpose of this essay is to analyse a function of French language in Charlotte Brontë's first novel, *The Professor*, referring the French education in nineteenth-century England. She wrote it under the pseudonym of Currer Bell. But when she sent the manuscript to publishers, they set a low valuation on it and they rejected to publish it. It was after her death that this novel was published in 1857. This is a story about an Englishman who goes to a French-speaking country, Belgium, and works there as an English teacher. He marries an Anglo-Swiss woman and builds up a massive fortune in the end. The reason he can succeed in Belgium is because of his French knowledge which he got in England when he was a schoolboy. In other words, French language is essential for his prosperity. The author has enough knowledge of this language and uses a lot of French words and expressions in this novel. It is well known that she had studied in Brussels before she became a novelist. But there seems no specific study to explain the relation between her experiences in Brussels and *The Professor*. I discuss how French language works on the characters' career, marriage, and their sayings and doings in *The Professor*, and examine how deep French language instruction of those days England is related to the characterization and development of the novel.

William Crimsworth, the protagonist, declines his uncles' offer to give him the living of Seacombe after his graduation of Eton, and he writes a letter to his brother, Edward, to ask whether he can work at Edward's mill. After he receives a reply from Edward, he visits the town of X—— to meet Edward. Edward questions him, 'Do you know anything besides that useless trash of college learning, Greek, Latin and so forth?'⁽¹⁾ He answers, 'I can read and write French and German' (15). Because of his knowledge of foreign languages, he is employed as a 'second clerk to manage the foreign correspondence of the House' (16). William knows French from the beginning of the narrative, and he can obtain his first job because of the competence in French.

However, it is not Edward but Hunsden Yorke Hunsden, a manufacturer and a millowner, who gives William a chance to display his skills at French. When William is fired by Edward, Hunsden says to William, 'You must travel in search of money, man. You can speak French — with a vile English accent — no doubt — still, you can speak it; go on to the Continent and see what will turn up for you there' (44). He adds that William may get to Brussels for five or six pounds, and declares that the city would suit William better than London. William decides to go to Brussels by the recommendation of Hunsden. With his knowledge of French, he is able to move to Brussels to find a new job and take a first step towards his future success.

In Brussels, when William visits Mr. Brown, who is an acquaintance of Hunsden, and Mr. Brown asked him about the level of his French ability, and it becomes clear how William learned French language in England. Mr. Brown tells to William, 'I am acquainted with the Director of a large establishment who is in want of a Professor of English and Latin', (50) and asks William, 'do you understand French well enough to teach Belgian boys English?' (50) William answers this question in the affirmative. Readers understand his way of studying the French language, because he explains that he 'studied French under a Frenchman', so he 'c[an] speak the language intelligibly though not fluently' (50). As he can 'read it well, and write it decently', (50) he is employed as the Professor of English and Latin of a Belgian boys' school. This scene makes clear that he learned French by a Frenchman in England, and that his ability of French is enough to be a professor in a French-speaking country.

At the ending of the novel, William obtains a large amount of money by working as a Professor in Brussels. He goes back to England and lives there happily. He teaches English not only at the boys' school but also at a girls' school called 'Pensionnat de Demoiselles', (51) but he finally quits both of the schools because of his unrequited love for Zoraïde Reuter and his affair with one of his students named Francis Evan Henri who marries him later. After his resignation, however, he obtains a new job of English professor directing all the classes of a high school in Brussels, and he receives a higher salary than before. After his marriage with Henri, he opens an own school with her in Brussels. It becomes one of the most popular schools in Brussels. Because William learns French in England and has a good French language ability, he earns a great deal of

money and success.

Other English characters such as Edward and Hunsden also learn French in England. As Edward and William lived separately since William was nine years old because of a family circumstance, it is not clear what kind of school Edward attended, but he too learns French in his school. When William works at Edward's mill as a second clerk, he explains that Edward 'c[an] read both French and German' (18). We are able to guess that Edward also got a grasp of French language in his school days.

Hunsden's French capacity is described more concretely than Edward, and William refers that Hunsden is able to read and speak it. At the first time when he enters Hunsden's room, he notices there are a lot of French and German books in the bookshelf. Also, William makes clear the level of Hunsden's oral skill in French. When Henri gives her greeting to Hunsden for the first time, William sees Hunsden replies to her in French and he narrates that he 'ha[s] not heard him speak that language before; he managed it very well' (196). Hunsden and Henri 'g[et] on at the French swimmingly' (196). Hunsden also has the knowledge of the French language as well as William.

In *The Professor*, the French language is a crucial element for the protagonist to earn his livelihood, and it plays an important role to decide his actions. French is also necessary for other English characters' business, and they use it as a practical language. In particular, William works as a teacher using French and he obtains a large amount of property. We know that the English characters in this narrative have enough skills in French. They can use French because of the French language instruction in England, and it is useful to support their career. Now, we turn to the French language education of nineteenth-century England.

Classical languages such as Latin and Greek were major subjects, especially until the late eighteenth century. It was not important for boys to study modern languages like French, German, and Italian. In boys' schools such public schools and grammar schools, teaching classic languages was the main purpose. The government placed the importance on Latin and Greek. The classical inspiration of eighteenth-century culture made a necessary part of any education.⁽²⁾ In *The Professor*, William learns not only French but also Latin and Greek at Eton. When he works at a boys' school in Brussels, he corrects 'a huge pile of English and Latin exercises' (60). The classic languages were

still significant subjects in the public schools and grammar schools even in the mid-nineteenth century.

The French Revolution of 1789 had an influence on the language education in Europe, and the government had gradually reconsidered the language instruction. Colin Shrosbree states that ‘The French Revolution of 1789 perhaps marked a symbolic point at which classics ceased to be a uniform and underlying basis of European culture’.⁽³⁾ The French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars reinforced the importance of national languages as an expression of patriotism. Accordingly, in Europe, the knowledge of classics was no longer a prerequisite for scholarly distinction or intellectual advance.⁽⁴⁾ Even in England, the government rethought the curriculum of the language education. With less emphasis on the classics, the reforming schoolmasters called for the introduction of new subjects such as English grammar and literature, modern languages, mathematics and practical studies.⁽⁵⁾ From the end of the eighteenth century, boys started to learn modern languages like French and German as important subjects in the public or grammar schools. It is natural that the English characters in *The Professor* graduated from public schools or grammar schools can read, speak and write French.

On the other hand, the French language in British girls’ schools was more significant than in the boys’ schools. In girls’ boarding schools, the ability to speak French was essentially a female achievement with accomplishments such as music, drawing, and dance during the Victorian era.⁽⁶⁾ Especially, in governess training schools, students had to learn more practical subjects because their goals were not marriage but financial independence as a governess. Ratios of the time in each subject is as follows; music 25%, miscellaneous information(mythology, astronomy, botany, literature, history) 23%, French and German 16.5%, drawing 6.5%, and so on.⁽⁷⁾ The data of this distribution tells us that modern languages like French and German are essential subjects in the girls’ education.

Before Brontë became a novelist, she went to two boarding schools and learned the basics of French there. She was good at the French, so her best friend, Ellen Nussey noted that ‘she soon began to make a good figure in French lessons’.⁽⁸⁾ Brontë studied the modern languages and drawing harder to become a governess and help out with her family budget. In the nineteenth century, the knowledge of French was a requisite

ability which governesses must have. For example, Mary Smith who wanted to be a governess regretted that she did not have the understanding of the modern languages and the skills of accomplishments such as piano and dance because even a master of a farmer's house requested the ability of music and French when he employed a governess.⁽⁹⁾ It was necessary for girls to receive sufficient education to be a governess. So Brontë learned French language eagerly and she obtained satisfactory results in the boarding school. The knowledge of French which she studied to be a governess because of the economical reason played a key role in her first novel.

Brontë became a governess, but she decided to go to Brussels to acquire the knowledge of French more because she wanted to open her own school with her sisters. In those days, shrewd governesses and managers of schools studied the modern languages such as French, German, and Italian to aim at more efficient advertising. For instance, 'notices placed in *The Times* always stressed that the advertiser had learnt her French in Paris and spoke it like a native'.⁽¹⁰⁾ Therefore, Brontë went to Brussels with her sister, Emily, and studied to improve her level of the capacity of French. *The Professor* is based on her experiences in Brussels.

In Brussels, Brontë was not only a pupil who studied French but also an English teacher who taught using the French language. M. Constantin Héger, who was a master of her Pensionnat, wrote a letter to her father about her and Emily's lives in Brussels;

Mlle Emily allait apprendre le piano; recevoir des leçons du meilleur professeur que nous ayons en Belgique, et déjà elle avait elle-même de petites élèves; elle perdait donc à la fois un reste d'ignorance et un reste plus gênant encore de timidité; Mille Charlotte commençant à donner des leçons en français, et d'scquérir cette assurance, cet aplomb si nécessaire dans l'enseignement. . .⁽¹¹⁾

Firstly, M. Héger referred to Emily and explained that she received piano lessons by "[le] meilleur professeur" in Belgium. She had some young pupils, and she widened her knowledge more and gained self-confidence. Secondly, he mentioned Charlotte and wrote that she started to teach some classes in French. She acquired assurance and

calmness which are needed to educate students. He admired their progress in this letters, so it makes clear Charlotte and Emily's improvement of their studies, and their skills and ability as teachers. Brontë had enough ability of French to have classes as well as William in *The Professor*.

In *The Professor*, Brontë describes English girls who study in a girls' boarding school in Brussels. "A few English pupils there [a]re in this school and these might be divided into two classes." (85-6) Firstly, they are "the continental English" (86) who follow their parents who wander "from land to land, from France to Germany, from Germany to Belgium." (86) They picks up "some scanty instruction" (86) and "many bad habits." (86) On the contrary, "[t]he second class [a]re British English" (86) and there are only six. Brontë does not write a clear explanation about their purpose of coming to Brussels, but they are graver, more decent, and more intellectual than "the continental English." (86) It is possible to suppose that they come to Brussels to receive the higher education like Brontë and aspiring governesses. In addition, Hunsden sends three young heiresses to Brussels when William opens his own school with his wife, Henri who speaks French. The reason is "to be polished off by Mrs. Crismworth," (209) and we can guess that the three girls would be learnt French by Mrs. Crismworth.

In *The Professor*, French language is not just one of foreign languages but plays an important role to provide the successful life to William in *The Professor*. More Englishmen became to learn French with the reform of public school education in the eighteenth century. They could make their fortune with the practical use of French language in their business. Brontë studied the language to become a governess of boarding schools and to improve her level of the French language ability in Brussels. The experience gave her a motif of an Englishman who can use French in her first novel. When we consider the French language in *The Professor*, we find the significance of the foreign language in characterizations and the development of the story.

Notes:

- (1) Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2008.
- (2) Colin Shrobsree, *Public Schools and Private Education* (Manchester : Manchester

- University Press, 1988), p.53.
- (3) Shrosbree, *Public Schools and Private Education*. p.53.
 - (4) Shrosbree, p.54.
 - (5) Richard S Tompson, *Classics or Charity?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971), p.41.
 - (6) Marcus Tomalin, “‘The Torment of Every Seminary’: the Teaching of French in British Schools, 1780-1830,” *History of Education*. Vol 40, Issue 4, London: Routledge, (2011), p.454.
 - (7) Lee Holcombe, *The Victorian Governess at Work* (Hamden: The Shoe String Press, 1973), p.24.
 - (8) Clement Shorter, *The Brontë’s Life and Letters*. Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: the Edinburgh University Press, 1908), p.86.
 - (9) Kathryn Hughes, *The Victorian Governess* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1993), p.39.
 - (10) Hughes, *The Victorian Governess*. p.41.
 - (11) Shorter, *The Brontë’s Life and Letters*. vol.1, pp.249-50.

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