Until recently, if someone had asked me what my second language was, I probably would have said that I do not have one. I have a smattering of vocabulary words in several, including Spanish, German, and Japanese, but I am not fluent enough in any of those to say I speak the language. Today, however, I might say that my second language is editing and publishing or possibly science-fiction-and-fantasy-geek depending on the circumstances. This year’s theme for the College of Humanities, “What’s Your Second Language?”, explains that everyone has a second language—even if they do not realize it—when we define language as any style of communication that strengthens identity and creates meaningful connections with others.

The theme takes its inspiration in part from President Spencer W. Kimball’s speech at BYU’s centennial celebration in 1975. He said, “Your double heritage and dual concerns with the secular and the spiritual require you to be ‘bilingual.’ As scholars you must speak with authority and excellence to your professional colleagues in the language of scholarship, and you must also be literate in the language of spiritual things.”¹

The College of Humanities emphasizes the study of language in various forms as a fundamental aspect of the humanities. Even programs that might not claim language as a central focus, such as philosophy or art history, teach their own kinds of language. In the Department of Philosophy, they teach the language of formalized logic and regularly engage with the nuances of language as they study philosophical texts. Art history teaches the vocabulary for analyzing art, and students must learn to accurately translate a visual medium into spoken and written words. Along with traditional languages taught in the College, our theme recognizes that mediums like art, poetry, dance, technology, mathematics, and even the Spirit constitute metaphorical second languages.

You have probably echoed this sentiment at some point in your own life. Have you ever had a conversation with a doctor who only used complicated technical terms to explain your illness? You may have wanted to tell them, “Could you say that in plain English?” (and you may have even done it). This experience happens every day, in many different scenarios. For instance, as a teenager, you may have had conversations with your friends that your parents did not understand because you were using slang.
And maybe, you have overheard a couple of people talking about a fantasy book you have not read and felt completely lost because they were using words specific to that book.

In this issue, we have looked at how learning a second world language, such as Spanish, can be transformational. My fellow writer in the Digital Media and Communications office, Lydia Hall (Interdisciplinary Humanities ’23), has studied both Spanish and French. She shares how that experience changed her: “Learning a language humbles you. It teaches you patience and endurance, because it’s hard. But it’s a beautiful thing, too, to try and connect with people in their own language.”

Learning metaphorical languages, such as dance or philosophy, can also create opportunities to connect with people. For example, when you hear a stranger using vocabulary related to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, like Relief Society or General Conference, it can create an opening to introduce yourself as a fellow member of the Church (especially if you are in an area where members are a small minority). You might become fast friends with someone new if you can have a conversation about your favorite singer’s deep tracks, or if you can commiserate about the fact that the latest installment in your favorite franchise did not meet your expectations. In this way, language allows us to find commonality through shared interests and opens the door to building stronger relationships with others.

In all of these cases, our second languages become modes of self-expression that resonate with others and allow us to communicate on a deeper level. Largely thanks to the Church’s missionary program, over 60% of BYU students speak at least one additional language,² and the College of Humanities regularly offers classes in 82 languages. As for the programs that do not specialize in a foreign language (such as English and philosophy), their instruction in other forms of communication certainly helps students develop a multitude of metaphorical second languages. While each department and program teaches languages unique to their field of study, every class in the BYU College of Humanities presents an opportunity to practice using the language of the Spirit as students prepare to go forth and serve.

ENDNOTES