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THE ISSUE

Teaching Languages and Cultures in a Post-9/11 World: North American Perspectives

COMMENTS FROM THE FIELD

The Role of Languages in a Post-9/11 United States

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There is little question that the horrific events of September 11, 2001, changed the nature of our world, how our nation is attempting to deal with a post-9/11 world, and how we will interact with the rest of the globe in the future. With the terrorist attacks, the conflict in Afghanistan, and the invasion of Iraq, some national trends have developed that clearly have an impact on language professionals. To a degree, it appears that these trends, or at least portions of them, are contradictory and transitory. In each instance, they are two-edged swords—causes for optimism and pessimism, rife with possibilities and replete with concerns.

First, 9/11 and subsequent events have produced much greater attention and awareness regarding the learning of languages and knowledge of other cultures. Knowing other languages and being aware of other cultures are definitely perceived now as necessary for national and homeland security. Second, at least so far, the increased attention to languages has produced only short-term, Band-Aid policies that are not going to resolve the long-term language problems of the United States. Even in the current international context, learning another language is still not viewed as part of a basic education. The United States has a national security language crisis, not an educational language problem. Third, policy makers and government officials have suddenly discovered heritage languages. Individuals in this country who know another language besides English are finally being viewed as a resource, not a problem. However, traditional bilingual education if not already dead, appears to be terminally ill. The *No Child Left Behind* Act essentially eliminates bilingual education in favor of English language acquisition, and three states actually have passed ballot initiatives outlawing it.

A closer examination of each of these trends reveals some interesting contradictions and raises questions about whether they will, in fact, have any lasting and meaningful influence on national language policies regarding either security or education. Foreign languages have received more attention from the media and policy makers in the last 2 years than was the case for the entire previous 2 decades. The Director of the FBI appearing on national television and seeking volunteers who know Arabic, Farsi, or Pashto dramatically called the nation's attention to our language needs. In early 2002, a briefing was held at the National Press Club specifically addressing the nation's language needs and capabilities. Stories about languages and national security appeared on the front pages of many of the country's major newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. Major League Baseball even got into the act, running a full page ad in last year's World Series program urging people "to learn a foreign language." Local newspapers in the heartland began to run stories about the importance of foreign languages in public safety, economics, and business. Some newspapers even addressed the value of foreign languages as part of a quality education.

Although the actual terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, came as a surprise, some of the factors that allowed them to happen, such as our national lack of language skills and international expertise, should have been anticipated. In April of the previous year, the House/Senate International Education Study Group held a briefing on "the crisis in Federal language capabilities." Lawmakers heard representatives of the FBI, the Department of Defense, and the Federal Immigration Courts discuss the federal government's shocking lack of language capabilities and the serious problems this posed in areas such as terrorism, peacekeeping, immigration, drug interdiction, and judicial hearings. This briefing led

the co-chairs of the Study Group, Senators Thad Cochran (R–MS) and Christopher Dodd (D–CT) and Representatives Sam Farr (D–CA) and Jim Leach (R–IA), to request officially that the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) conduct a study of the federal government's language needs and capabilities. After the terrorist attacks, the GAO intensified its efforts and released the report in January, 2002. It focused attention on the U.S. Army, the FBI, the State Department, and the Foreign Commercial Service. A classified version of the report was prepared, also including the National Security Agency (NSA). In the public report, the GAO found inter alia that:

> The four federal agencies covered in our review reported shortages of translators and interpreters as well as shortages of staff, such as diplomats and intelligence specialists, with foreign language skills that are critical to successful job performance. Agency officials stated that these shortfalls have adversely affected agency operations and hindered U.S. military, law enforcement, intelligence, counterterrorism, and diplomatic efforts. (GAO, 2002, p. 2)

In the meantime, on September 14 and 19, 2000, almost 1 year before the tragic attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the Senate Subcommittee on International Security, Proliferation, and Federal Services held two formal hearings on "the State of Foreign Language Capabilities in National Security and the Federal Government." In the first hearing, witnesses from government agencies dealing with diplomacy, defense, intelligence, and public safety addressed the nature and extent of the government's language "crisis." In the second hearing, the Secretary of Education, the Director of the National Security Education Program (NSEP), a district foreign language supervisor, the executive director of a national association representing languages and study abroad, and a classroom teacher from Mississippi discussed solutions to our national language shortages. Senator Cochran began the second hearing by noting that at the previous hearing composed of high-level federal policy makers who desperately need employees with language skills, "each witness mentioned the importance of language instruction in elementary and secondary schools" (U.S. Senate, 2000, p. 21).

What is disquieting is that in the intervening discussions of homeland security, intelligence, diplomacy, and defense since 9/11, education (particularly language study and international education) has not been much of a consideration. Dozens of congressional hearings have been held over the last 2 years dealing with these issues, and our national foreign language needs have been part of the discussions. However, they have produced very little in the way of increased funding, new programs, or national policies. Typical is a report of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence that decries "a government-wide problem of insufficient language and area expertise among officials working on national security and foreign policy issues" (Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 2002, p. 29). This Committee goes further than most of the others and even identifies the problem. "The problem stems from at least three larger societal challenges: general international isolation of a majority of the American people, limited study abroad beyond Western Europe, and limited foreign language study" (Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 2002, p. 29). The proposed solution is to improve relations between the Defense Language Institute (DLI) and the NSEP and to establish a small National Flagship Language Initiative within NSEP. Meanwhile, the Department of Defense (DoD) wants to move NSEP to the Department of Education because it does not serve a "core function" in DoD. Not to be outdone, the Senate Intelligence Committee recommended moving NSEP to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). At present, NSEP remains in DoD as part of the National Defense University (NDU) but faces a very real possibility that it will run out of funding within the next 3 years.

Amid all the attention and rhetoric, federal funding for languages and international education has been neither consistent nor encouraging. Last year, Congress increased support for Title VI, foreign languages and international education in Higher Education, but the Senate is seeking a $10 million decrease this year. Funding for language programs has been increased for the DLI, the FBI, and the intelligence agencies, but at the same time the Administration and the House have attempted to eliminate funding for the Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP), which provides support for foreign languages in elementary and secondary schools.

In a November 20, 2002, press release, Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, saying "we need to put the 'world' back into 'world-class' education," made foreign languages and international education priorities for the U.S. Department of Education. Despite this announcement and its continued support for International Education Week, the Department has launched no meaningful or significant initiatives regarding foreign languages and international education. In fact, both this

year and last the Education Department's budget request would eliminate FLAP and a number of other small education programs, such as the Star Schools and Javits programs that support language study in elementary and secondary schools. The Administration and House versions of the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act would have eliminated these programs as well. The Senate saved them in final negotiations over NCLB. Whereas NCLB clearly includes foreign languages in the "core academic subject" areas, the law's emphasis on reading, testing, and teacher credentials, combined with severely inadequate funding, appears to have shortchanged foreign language programs in some school districts.

Another significant aspect of the increased attention languages have been receiving since 9/11 is that heritage languages and those who know them are now being perceived as important national resources. One of the most telling examples of this attention was a September 9, 2002, interview with Senator Richard Shelby (R–AL) in *The New York Times*. Senator Shelby, a former Chairman of the Select Intelligence Committee (and the chief sponsor of a number of bills to make English the Official Language of the United States), cites the failure of human intelligence and our lack of language skills as among the primary reasons that the United States failed to prevent the terrorist attacks. Shelby said "the government must do a better job of turning America's ethnic diversity and immigrant heritage into an intelligence asset by recruiting into its ranks Americans who speak Arabic and Farsi and can better meld into the byways of the terrorists" (Mitchell, 2002, p. A1).

Whether this recognition of the importance of heritage languages has been accompanied by a decrease in the influence of the English Only/English First movement or a decrease in hostility toward those whose first language is not English, or both, is hard to determine. Although the terrorist attacks certainly heightened the awareness of the value of heritage languages, the current recognition of heritage languages may have begun 5 years earlier in 1996, when Loretta Sanchez defeated Representative Bob Dornan in a supposedly "safe" California district. Shortly after that election, 10 conservative Republican Senators introduced an English Plus Resolution urging Americans to learn another language in addition to English. All of the Senators were from states with large immigrant constituencies. The 2000 census reported that the United States is now a minority-majority nation. A number of Members of Congress, as well as the Secretary of Education and other policy makers, are now studying Spanish. Whether this is because they value language, want to communicate with constituents, or wish to get reelected, the bottom line is that the political climate has shifted and knowing another language is considered important.

However, as we have moved to a wartime footing with military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq the development of an accompanying "Fortress America" mentality would seem to undermine support for cross-cultural understanding and tolerance. The House of Representatives actually changed the names of French fries and French toast in the House cafeteria menu to "freedom fries" and "freedom toast," an action that brought protests from the Democratic side of the aisle about the costs associated with such an action! As international tensions continue, whether this countervailing tendency toward xenophobia will affect the popularity of foreign and heritage languages remains to be seen.

Finally, Joseph Lo Bianco, one of the chief architects of Australia's National Language Policy, recently wrote a very insightful article entitled "Uncle Sam vs. Mr. Unz" (Lo Bianco, in press). A keen observer of American politics, Lo Bianco discusses "two remarkable developments." The first development is the attention that foreign languages are receiving as part of the need to strengthen homeland and national security. The second is the movement led by California millionaire Ron Unz that has succeeded in getting voters to ban bilingual education in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts. The result is that "Mister Unz has revitalized the fortunes of the disparate English-only movement, just as September 11 has mobilized Uncle Sam to revitalize the fortunes of foreign languages." The author examines these paradoxical phenomena and concludes that the answer to understanding them is not to be found by looking to language teaching, or security planning, or international relations but by observing "the social context of bilingualism" in the United States. It is important to note that, as passed in the 1960s, the Bilingual Education Act was "concerned for the educational prospects of poor children who speak languages other than English." Over its lifetime it never transformed itself from its initial characterization as an antipoverty law "into a policy for reconstituting children's home languages as a positive intellectual, cultural and social tool." Most recently, that positive assessment of multiple language use has been appropriated by the heritage language community, but in doing so some of the concerns of that community have landed right in the midst of the security

concerns expressed by the military and the government.

The present tension, then, between bilingual education and national security is indicative of a much larger problem: tension between national security and education in general. We are now aware that languages are important and that we have a national language crisis, but we are not addressing long-term solutions. We are not building the pipeline that begins in elementary school and continues on through life. Although languages are being seen as a security issue, they are not being valued as an education issue. Until policy makers realize the connection between education and real security, we are not likely to see serious change that improves language learning in the United States and prepares our citizens to deal with the rest of the world.

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Teaching Language and Culture as Hegemonic Practice

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Shortly after September 11, 2001, the Secretary of the Air Force issued a letter saying that, in order for the service to carry out its mission in this post-9/11 world, all Air Force personnel would be encouraged to study foreign languages and cultures. This statement constitutes a sea change in strategic practice in two ways: First, it shifts the point of view of this branch of the military services from "war at a distance" to "war as interpersonal interaction based on language"; second, it reverses the long-standing assumption that the world wishes to be enough "like us" that we can conduct our international affairs entirely in English. Although many have applauded this shift in perspectives for its awareness of world linguistic and cultural differences, in my view this shift does not address the most basic paradox that arises in the teaching and learning of languages and cultures: Are we working in the service of the nation state, a domain in which the dominant ideology of the modern period is an equation of the tripartite entity, state, language, and culture, or are we working in the service of ordinary people throughout the world for whom language and culture are diverse, multifarious, complex, continuous, semiotic resources which do not parse out into neat formal and structural entities?

My argument in what follows is that linguists, scholars in fields related to linguistics, and language teachers have largely assumed the tripartite equation of the nation state—language, culture, nation. In doing so, we have largely worked in the service of the nation state even when and where we have voiced opposition. I suggest that we have an opportunity in this post-9/11 world to begin to revise our understanding of what language is.

LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND THE NATION STATE

I first encountered the underlying assumption that languages and cultures (and nations) sort out into clearly distinct formal-structural entities some years ago when I began to research the languages and cultures of Northern North America (primarily Alaska and Northern Canada). I read in a comparative linguistic study of the "Northern Athabaskan languages" that there were, in fact, no truly isolated or isolatable lan-