The Perils of a Single-Language Policy

America's short-sighted linguistic chauvinism must give way in the interests of international economics and world peace.

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When the prime minister of Japan recently chided American businessmen for not working as hard as their Japanese counterparts, he raised the hair on many an executive neck. Americans don't appreciate criticism from any quarter, foreign or domestic. Fault finding is particularly difficult to swallow when it involves cherished institutions: the American belief in hard work, and pride in America's industrial ingenuity—both ideas that are older in the American psyche than the republic itself. As unpalatable as the prime minister's remarks may have been, however, they were only the appetizer for a meal that borders on disgrace and portends a national crisis. Among his questions was how many American businessmen spoke Japanese. While he only mentioned it briefly, the prime minister touched one of the sore spots on the Yankee hide—its shameful foreign language deficiency.

The Conceit of the English-Speaking

Most English-speaking people have historically possessed a certain conceit about their language. While they have not cultivated and cared for it as the French have, they have presumed its nobility and have had the nasty habit of thinking less of those persons who did not speak it exactly as they thought it should be spoken or—worst of all sins—

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could not speak it at all. G. B. Shaw ridiculed this practice in *Pygmalion*: Eliza Doolittle was a “prisoner of the gutter” when she spoke cockney and “my fair lady” at the ball when she spoke the Queen’s English. Shaw was sensitive to the British habit of “branding a child on the tongue at birth” and treating the child accordingly for the rest of his or her life. During the era of imperialism, the language followed the Union Jack around the world, and the British were very careful—and wise—to see to it that the “right” people quickly learned the new, externally imposed mother tongue. Indeed, the children of the colony’s ruling class were often sent to England for total immersion in English. To speak English in a British colony was the key to upward mobility and a secure position in the bureaucracy; having little or no knowledge of English condemned one to the plow and the rice paddy. A similar pattern persists in the former British colonies today. While most have adopted their own new or rejuvenated national tongue, English remains the language of the governing and professional classes.

This same conceit about the nobility of the English language permeates the American character. America was a patchwork of linguistic dissimilarity at the time of its founding. In 1776, French-, Spanish-, Dutch-, German-, and Swedish-speaking minorities dotted the Atlantic shore. That English became the national language was both an accident and a necessity. The accident was that there were more (but not *that* many more) English-speaking people in the American colonies than those who spoke any other single language and that those who spoke English were the leaders in the revolution. The necessity arose after the Revolutionary War had been won. In 19th century geopolitical thought, if “the wretched refuse of your teeming shore” were to be made into *e pluribus unum*, there must be one common language. The states would be united only when they all spoke the same language, and that language was to be English. Immigrants arriving in the new world might seek out others in a neighborhood or county where their native language was spoken, but their children would become “good Americans” by learning English in free public schools. As in a British colony, the route of upward mobility in the new nation was to learn English and, once that was accomplished, to melt into the pot by losing one’s accent. As more and more immigrants arrived (a wave that crested in the early part of the 20th century), the zeal to teach English increased, manifesting itself in a curriculum pattern that taught the language over and over and over again.

Of course, the national policy and the
nations, and still support and love the United States.

But logical ideas can quickly become irrational dogma, and the 19th Century American concluded that if speaking English is good, then speaking some other language must be bad. Thus the United States entered upon a century and a half of 

**English Spoken Here**

To return to the chiding prime minister, how many American businessmen have learned Japanese? How many Japanese have learned English? There are 10,000 Japanese businessmen in the United States, and virtually all speak English. There are about 1,000 American businessmen in Japan, yet very few of them speak any Japanese. When two American sales representatives, each selling the same product, approach a foreign client, who has the advantage? The one who speaks the client's language, or the one who either presumes that the client must speak English or takes along an interpreter? The United States relies more and more on foreign sales, yet we send our salespersons into the world market with the severe handicap of being unable to speak their client's language. And our economic handicap is increasing, for while the number of international sales opportunities continues to grow, foreign language instruction is declining in our schools.

The Joint National Committee for Language reports that only 15 percent of all American high school students study a foreign language (Lewis, 1981). Only 8 percent of our colleges currently require even a single credit in foreign language for admission, whereas 34 percent of them had such a requirement in 1966 (Wolfe, 1980). More Americans were studying Russian language and history in 1965 than are studying either in 1983 (Chancellor, 1983). Enrollments in modern foreign language courses at the college level dropped from 13.5 percent of the total student body in 1970 to 8.9 percent in 1977 (Wolfe, 1980), and compared to 1973, only about half as many of today's American students are electing to spend any of their college years abroad (Simon, 1981). The proportion of foreign language secondary school teachers (compared to all secondary school teachers) declined from 6.4 percent in 1966 to 4.2 percent in 1976 (Wolfe, 1980). Fewer than 4 percent of current high school graduates have had more than two years of a foreign language (Lewis, 1981).

Contrast this dismal record with that of European and Asian nations. In Scandinavia, most students must study five years of English; in Germany, six years; and in the People's Republic of China, the goal is seven years. Indeed, in the Soviet Union there are more teachers of English than there are students of Russian in the United States (Chancellor, 1983; Simon, 1981). Such a push by the rest of the world to learn English, if misread, can add fuel to the "no need for foreign language study" movement in the United States. Opponents of foreign language instruction ask why we should learn their language if they are learning ours. The answer is simple: respect and deference. And that takes us back to the arena of international business. By speaking a client's language, salespeople pay the client a compliment; they demonstrate that they have taken the time and have the consideration to honor the client. Such a posture may not have been necessary when "made in USA" was an assurance of quality, but regretfully those days are behind us.

Sometimes our lingual inadequacies have ludicrous results. Pepsi Cola, seeking to capture the Chinese market, came up with this catchy slogan: "Come alive with Pepsi." By the time it had been translated into Chinese on Taiwan, it read, "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead." No sale! General Motors sought to sell its Nova in South America, oblivious to the fact that no va in Spanish means "it doesn't go." When they woke up and changed the name to Caribe, sales increased dramatically (Linn, 1981). Aside from the world that it opens for the American tourist abroad, then, and aside from what sheer fun it is to study someone else's language and culture, instruction in foreign language makes good economic sense.
There are also positive diplomatic and defense benefits. Our citizens' and diplomats' inability to speak foreign languages portends a dangerously inadequate understanding of world affairs (Simon, 1981). Nevertheless, the U.S. Foreign Service no longer requires applicants to have any foreign language background—the requirement was dropped because so few Americans have studied other languages.

Our serious miscalculations in Vietnam and Iran underscored our need to know more about people in other countries. Long before we were heavily involved in Southeast Asia, we had to rely on French intelligence data because there was not one American-born specialist on the area in any American university. When we invaded Cambodia, there were no more than one or two Khmer speakers in the entire American diplomatic/military establishment. Might this explain our alienation from the people of the country? Had we had intelligence forces who understood the history and culture of Southeast Asia, perhaps our policies in that part of the world would have been more enlightened. At the time of the Iranian revolution in 1978, only 6 of the 60 Foreign Service officers in Iran spoke Farsi. When the embassy was seized, even fewer of our personnel could speak the language of their captors (Linn, 1981).

The arrogance of the English speaker poisons the diplomatic and defense front because it prevents our citizens who travel abroad and our diplomats who work abroad from really knowing the rest of the world—friend or foe. Some diplomats balk at the idea of learning an "obscure language," alleging that everybody who counts in a country speaks English. In Somalia, one U.S. diplomat said, "Only the people out in the countryside speak Somali." Shades of Southeast Asia and Iran!

Education Secretary Bell observed before Congress that global education may be this nation's least expensive defense, but his view is apparently not widely shared on Capitol Hill. The Reagan Administration wraps itself around the flagpole of national defense. It also champions business and free enterprise solutions to the problems of business, yet it is proposing a cut in support for special programs and centers at which international education research and teaching are carried out. Even the Fulbright and Fulbright-Hayes scholarships that send Americans to foreign countries and bring foreign students to study in the United States are under attack.

The Russians aren't so foolish. They actively recruit foreign students to study in the Soviet Union, paying the full cost. Over 1,000 Latin American students are studying under scholarship in the Soviet Union; fewer than 50 are studying in the United States. Tomorrow's Latin American leadership is getting a Russian, not an American, education (Chancellor, 1983). In the long run, who will win in Latin America?

The current Administration does not offer outright opposition to the idea of foreign language and cultural instruction and international student exchange, of course. Instead, it questions "the intensity" of the need, arguing that the decline only represents a shift in student interest (Wolfe, 1980). And perhaps it does. The American public has only a slight interest in teaching foreign languages. While a few major colleges and universities have recently increased their foreign language entrance requirements, few major colleges and universities have recently increased their foreign language entrance requirements.

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ments, there is no national outcry for foreign language teaching. Indeed, in a recent poll of parents' concerns for their children's education, only 37 percent wanted more instruction in foreign languages, and 5 percent wanted less (McFarland, 1983). Of all curricular areas reported in the poll, increasing instruction in foreign languages was next to last in community concern, beating out only extracurricular activities. What is particularly disturbing is that this poll was taken in a highly educated university community. One shudders to contemplate what results would be obtained in a more typical American city.

What Must Be Done

Curiously, Americans—who have always been characterized by their rapture with the practical answer—today reject the obvious solution to this national crisis. First, we must increase, not cut, expenditures for foreign language instruction. The funds should be spent in two ways: English-speaking children should learn at least one modern foreign language, and non-English-speaking children should be taught English (Lewis, 1981). The instruction should begin as early as in the schooling process as possible, for that is where research suggests it is most effective. Further, such instruction should continue for many years (a minimum of five) in order that the student may become truly fluent in a foreign language and actually be able to use it. More colleges and universities should join the few that are now increasing their foreign language entrance requirements. This will then act as leverage to force secondary schools to offer more languages and teach them in greater depth. All colleges and universities should require at least five semesters of foreign language study (or exemption through demonstrated proficiency) as a minimum qualification for the receipt of a bachelor's degree. The same leverage principle can be used by graduate schools on recalcitrant colleges, requiring proficiency in a foreign language for entrance into graduate study. Although it would be difficult to accomplish, there is no reason why professional schools—particularly schools of business administration—should not have similar requirements.

We must purge ourselves of the notion of “superior” and “inferior” languages and cultures (Lewis, 1981). For example, in schools where a significant number of students speak Spanish, the goal must not be “driving out Spanish,” so much as instructing in English. Indeed, the school with a mixed-lingual population has a decided advantage, for students can teach each other their own languages. Spanish-speaking students can teach Spanish to their English-speaking classmates, and vice versa. What a wonderful outcome: a student body fluent in two languages, confident in both and less likely to be exploited in either. Of greatest importance, we must expand and encourage international student exchange programs, for such are not only the foundation of effective defense, but they also provide a pool of understanding from which a stream of world tolerance just might flow.

American education has been characterized as a collection of reactions to crises; it has been said that it has walked backwards into the future. It is true that what marks itself as curriculum is in reality a fusion of tradition, psychological folklore, and vestiges of reactions to former crises. Sputnik caught us napping in science, math, and foreign languages. We awakened and put a man on the moon, but then we went back to sleep. Advocating the teaching of foreign languages is the labor of Sisyphus: it attaches to a crisis, it almost becomes a permanent part of the curriculum, the crisis passes, and studying language goes out of style.

Perhaps this time it will be different, for the stakes are dearer than a ride to the moon. When we find our business executives and diplomats coming back from foreign countries empty-handed, when we find our balance of payments an impossible burden, and when we find ourselves bungling into war to protect one people whose language we do not speak from another whose language we also do not speak, we will have only ourselves to blame.

References


