A new language-teaching narrative for a 21st-century democracy

Since the late 1950s, two key socio-political factors beyond the academy have limited the range of languages taught on US campuses, shaping the overall conception of what language education can and should accomplish in a society. Securitization of linguistic knowledge has been the first factor, meaning that language and area studies education has been expanded (and at times, contracted) in the service of national security and economic agendas. Privatization of the benefits of this knowledge has been the second, interpreting language learning as a form of "investment" in self or human "capital." Together, these two paradigms have outweighed all other considerations, including student backgrounds and interests, the pursuit of new forms of knowledge, discovery, and reflection, crucial new methods and directions in academic research, Indigenous and endangered language preservation or reclamation, concerns with linguistic justice, and, last but not least, civic needs in a society with no fewer than 350 home languages.

Overshadowed and outfunded by the national security paradigm, the community of language and area studies professionals in the academy has exercised comparably little control, both over the narrative of why teach languages and the range of languages deemed fit to learn. Our attempts to attract new language-learners with college course descriptions, academic majors fair slogans, department website recruitment messages, and professional association reports have too often relied on words borrowed from the logics of securitization and privatization. This habit of opportunism has colluded with even longer-entrenched ethnonationalist undertone of our curricula, textbooks, and publicity materials, which tend to map a single language onto a single country (monolingualism), perpetuate the divide between "native" and "non-native speakers" (linguistic nativism), or essentialize cultural characteristics by presenting them as uniform and immutable (culturalism).

Many of us have gone along with these customs not just out of careerism or ignorance. Often, we have seen the tactical nod to essentialism and nativism as a low enough price to pay for our continued ability to teach about the otherwise neglected tongues and places that matter to us, to our students and their families, and to the world. But there can come a time when a once tolerated discrepancy reveals itself to be malignant, and admitting as much is no less than a professional responsibility. This is that time.

In this charter, we, the undersigned, insist on a courageous and rejuvenated rationale for teaching languages, and we encourage other practitioners, researchers, and learners to join us. We reject the so-called wisdom of subordinating language and area studies learning to the needs of securitization and privatization. We reassert as our

professional idiom a sense of civic responsibility and social agency, by naming the language-teaching needs that befit a truly democratic society in the twenty-first century. It is with these needs in mind that we intend to continue our work.

First, how did we get here?

The Cold War, as a global conflict tangled up with post-imperial decolonization, did not, of course, invent the first strategic rationale for language teaching in the US. Languages had been an established pillar of West-centric liberal arts education, inextricably tied to traditions that considered knowledge as tantamount to mastery over other lands, their peoples, resources, artifacts, and futures. But the Cold War did put languages and the burgeoning area studies under the guiding purview of US state security and its institutional management. To quote anthropologist Benedict Anderson, “under these new conditions, the more powerful American elites became acutely aware of how little they knew about many parts of the world in whose politics they now expected to play a key role” (*A Life Beyond Boundaries*, 34).

The National Defense Education Act (1958) was tone-setting. It not only initiated the Modern Language Association’s language course enrollment censuses but also authorized and subsidized dozens of area studies centers, several language institutes, and substantial modern language and area study fellowships, normalizing the securitarian agenda in higher education for decades to come. Present-day government initiatives, such as the US State Department’s sponsorship of “critical need languages,” are likewise the Act’s direct descendants. The burden of the securitarian paradigm became glaringly obvious on September 19, 2019, when the US Department of Education expressly meddled with university curricula by threatening to pull funding from the Duke University-University of North Carolina Consortium for Middle East Studies for helping university students understand “the positive aspects of Islam.” It is our responsibility as language teaching professionals to stand with our colleagues at Duke-UNC, whose expertise and humanity in their teaching provide a forum for exploration beyond mere national security strategy.

The wane of the Cold War and the takeoff of the “digital revolution” in communications technology circa 1990 opened up the world, enabling flows of capital, intellectual property, and information across national borders. The fast-paced globalization of capital and labor has created conditions for marketing language-learning as a commodity and for classifying language users as “consumers” or “exporters” (Hogan-Brun, *Linguanomics*, 130). Whereas the securitarian agenda had mandated that knowing specific languages benefit the state, the neoliberal approach has presumed the

universal pursuit of individual gain and competition over, say, community well-being, and this presumption ties in with national and global economic rationales in subtle ways.

This explains why the bulk of studies on the benefits of language learning and bilingualism has focused on the cognitive agenda. Proponents of the so-called "bilingual advantage" insist that language learning ostensibly improves brain activity by intensifying blood flow and mobilizing executive function (e.g., attention and memory). They suggest that it also physically alters the brain, correlating with higher gray matter volume in the left inferior parietal lobule that is linked to language acquisition, mathematical abilities, and hand-object interaction. For the young, the argument goes, this means larger vocabularies, higher emotional intelligence, better math test scores, more versatile career opportunities. To the aging, learning languages allegedly offers a 5.1-year delay in the onset of Alzheimer's, keeping patients more functional even at advanced stages of the illness.

While the debate about the substance and extent of the bilingual advantage is open and likely to persist as more studies are conducted and published, we question the emphasis on this perspective at the expense of other social considerations. A recent review of 65 empirical studies published between 2005 and 2011 reports that "although 33 studies addressed cognitive benefits, the development of positive attitudes toward other languages/cultures was investigated in only three." The personal-growth story, we argue, has been opportune for this stage in post-industrial capitalism. It has matched the corporate push for branded "wellness" and, in the same breath, played into the cross-border accounts of economic growth, which render positive correlations between capitalism and the number of spoken languages statistically obvious. In the UK, the All-Party Parliamentary Group showed in 2017 that Britain would stand to lose £50 billion due to its disinvestment from language instruction. Countries like Switzerland, conversely, are consistently shown to attribute their prosperity to linguistic plurality. The formula is simple: the more languages are put to work, the more extensive the trade relations are and the higher the exports levels. For individuals, increased earnings and improved career prospects follow as though organically.

In the face of decreasing enrollments in language programs, language professionals have taken to describe speaking a language as an asset and learning one as an investment. But in reality, the securitarian and neoliberal rationales for language learning advance a hierarchy of very few languages allegedly more strategic or profitable than all others. This leads to the attrition of many language programs on our campuses, which, in turn, weakens linguistic diversity in the world outside. Especially hard hit are the Indigenous, minority, immigrant, and sign languages, which, with the

exception of ASL, systematically fall by the wayside in discussions of college language requirements and curriculum-building, just as the supposed financial windfall of multilingualism eludes minoritized bilinguals who have learned those "less marketable" languages at home.

As teachers, we do not deny the possibility of some private, corporate, or intelligence and strategic gains from the study of languages and cultures. What we do deny is that touting and honing these gains ought to be the primary learning outcome framing how we educate, when so many glaring societal and planetary needs for language are staring us in the faces. These include increasing wealth and wage disparity, access to education, healthcare and other resources; voter disenfranchisement, criminal injustice and all forms of social exclusion; Indigenous material and cultural expropriation and Indigenous language loss; ethnonationalism, xenophobia, ableism, and all forms of discrimination that operate discursively to produce deadly effects in the world (Hall, *The Fateful Triangle*, 43-44).

We pledge to adopt a new narrative around encouraging people to learn languages on and off campuses, one that eliminates toxic competition for enrollments among departments in favor of solidarity; one that is empowered to talk back to the government and economic establishments that depend on our expertise; one that no longer grants precedence to national security and privatization rationales in our curricula, learning outcomes, and collegial conversations: **In a modern democracy, language-learning is a matter of civic welfare. Multilingualism strengthens communities across dividing lines. Expanded translation services boost minority voting. Access to bilingual medical information lowers the chances of drug overdosing. Personnel speaking more than only English assures adequate health care and takes pressure off the families of the sick. Court stenographers competent with minority languages result in fewer miscarriages of justice against immigrants and people of color.** In promoting language learning, **we will remind our students of the desperate social media calls for Spanish and Indigenous interpreters amid the Trump administration's family separation debacles. And of the children like 7-year-old Jakelin Caal, a speaker of the Mayan language Q'eqchi', whose December 2018 death in detention may have been preventable had the country grasped the diversity of immigrant languages and their speakers' humanity. Or of linguistic profiling behind the removal of Arabic speakers from flights and law enforcement's illegal apprehensions of denizens and citizens.** It is with these examples that colleges and universities, we argue, must advance language study in the twenty-first century.

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