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The Study of Foreign Languages Should Not Be a Zero-Sum Game

By STEPHEN BROCKMANN

Last April, the University of Southern California announced plans to eliminate its German department, stating that it wanted to shift resources away from European languages to Asian languages like Chinese and Japanese. The decision was made in view of the growing importance of Asia for the American economy generally and the economy in Los Angeles specifically.

That move, and others like it, has sparked a debate about the relative importance of learning European languages like French, German, and Italian. But much of that debate is governed by false assumptions about the process of globalization, the nature of language learning, and the role of the humanities in higher education.

Moves to eliminate the study of one or more languages in order to shift support to the study of other languages proceed from the assumption that there is a stable, limited, and sufficient amount of money already available for language study. In other words, college administrators seem to assume that global shifts in economic power call for changes in the distribution of their budget for the study of foreign languages and cultures, rather than an increase in that budget as a whole. That misconception, in turn, suggests that administrators see the much-vaunted globalization of the world's economy as a process by which particular countries and regions become more important, while other countries and regions become less important — but in which the importance of foreign countries to our economy remains constant.

But that is precisely what globalization is not. Globalization, which has accelerated over the last two decades, is a process by which the health of any nation's individual economy becomes increasingly dependent on international trade. Today few economies remain self-sufficient, and many are dependent on trade not with one or two other countries, but with a vast network of interconnected economies. Countries like the United States that could once rely on domestic trade for economic growth must now look abroad.

One of the few bright spots in the American economy in the past few years was that the United States was selling more goods and services to the rest of the world (largely thanks to a weak dollar), especially to the well-off economies of Europe. That success partially — although by no means completely — offset the decline in demand at home. Given the economy's deterioration in recent months, sales to the rest of the world have become even more important.

The rise of globalization suggests that the United States needs to radically increase the study of foreign languages and cultures, not just shift resources from the study of some languages or regions to others. Precisely the opposite has occurred over the past several decades. In 1960, 16.1 percent of American college students studied foreign languages; in 2002 only 8.6 percent did, according to a recent MLA report.

Although foreign-language study has become somewhat more popular in recent years, its overall decline remains striking. During the most intensive period of globalization, our country's investment in understanding other countries at the

postsecondary level has decreased. Yet almost all students in the countries with the world's most successful economies — including China and India — study foreign languages and cultures at some point. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the extensive study of foreign languages is positively correlated with economic and political power.

One reason for the decline of foreign-language study in America is probably the lingering, albeit often unacknowledged, belief that globalization will ultimately lead to a world in which everyone — or everyone who matters — speaks English. The assumption, implicit or explicit, is that as the world becomes ever more closely connected, English will become so dominant that it will be unnecessary for native speakers of English to learn other languages.

There is some truth to the idea that English is now the lingua franca of international business and science. But that may not always be the case, and, moreover, it is probably not a good idea for Americans to assume that a world in which most people understand their language, but they don't understand other peoples' languages, will be a safe or happy one for our nation. A country that merely wants to buy goods and services from other countries, thus accumulating a huge trade deficit, may be able to rely on others' willingness to speak its language. But a country that wants to sell goods and services must learn the languages and cultures of its prospective customers.

It is highly likely that if the United States were to invest more money in understanding foreign languages and cultures, it would be more successful in marketing its goods and services (and its political policies) abroad. In other words, it is not implausible that the chronic U.S. trade deficit, as well as America's lessened prestige abroad, may be connected to our chronic deficit in knowledge of the rest of the world.

As a professor of German, I have my own investment in the study of European languages and cultures. But even if only for economic reasons, the United States cannot afford to forget Europe, whose combined economy rivals that of the United States and eclipses that of China or India. Moreover, Western Europeans have, on average, a significantly higher standard of living and more disposable income than citizens of most other countries and are therefore highly attractive as potential consumers of American goods and services.

Strong pedagogical reasons, too, call for continued support of European languages in American higher education. English is itself a European language, and it is considerably easier for native speakers of English to learn languages like French, German, Italian, and Spanish than Chinese or Japanese. Promoters of the serious study of foreign languages in the United States would therefore do well to recommend that native English speakers wanting to learn an Asian language first study a European language. Any task of great difficulty is best undertaken in stages. Experience and common sense suggest that native English speakers who start their language study with the most difficult languages are far more likely to give up than those who begin with somewhat less difficult languages. One result of a turn from European to Asian languages is likely to be even less foreign-language fluency than there is now — hardly a desirable outcome. The fact is that American college students should study both European and Asian languages. We need to get away from either/or thinking.

I want to make three other points about European languages and cultures. The first and most important is that studying them is crucial to understanding the world as it exists today, which has been largely formed by Europe. When I say this I am sometimes accused of taking a Eurocentric view, but most literate people would probably agree that the world we live in today was shaped, for better or worse, by Europe. Countries like Japan and China have become economically and politically successful over the past century primarily by carefully studying European history and practices. For example, during Japan's Meiji Restoration — the period from 1868 to 1912, when the country's economic and military status rose to the level of European

powers — Japanese leaders emulated Europe's policies from the Industrial Revolution. It is hard to overestimate the impact of Europe's example on the rest of the world.

Another consideration is the relationship between Europe and America. In 1996 the political scientist Samuel P. Huntington published a controversial but important book called *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order,* in which he suggested that the world consists of eight primary cultures, the most important being that of the West, broadly conceived — i.e., the culture of Western Europe and the United States.

That distinction was sometimes simplified in popular understanding as "the West against the rest," although in fact Huntington's arguments were considerably more nuanced and complex. But one does not need to agree with every point in his book to understand that the cultures of Europe and the culture of the United States have a mutual affinity. Not only did much of American culture emerge out of European cultures, but contemporary Europe consists of stable, prosperous, democratic countries that are strategically and politically allied with the United States, in spite of disagreements over points of policy, such as those that followed America's ill-advised invasion of Iraq. For that reason, an affiliation with Europe continues to be crucial to the United States, and to individual Americans.

Finally, we should not underestimate the importance of ethnic heritage for individual language learners. Although the country's demographic profile is changing, most Americans are of European descent. For reasons of ethnic pride and family heritage, many students choose to study languages spoken in the parts of the world their ancestors came from. There is nothing wrong with that; within limits, it is probably a good thing for Americans to be aware of, and take cautious pride in, their ethnic heritage, as long as such pride is not carried so far that it results in the denigration of other cultures and heritages. Among other things, it helps them to understand that American culture and its worldwide successes are the result of contributions from many different languages and cultures.

At the moment, Americans are understandably focused on our own problems. But those problems have arisen, in large part, because of our failure to understand the rest of the world. We need to encourage all college students to study foreign languages and cultures, and we need to increase budgets for foreign-language departments, not just shift limited funds from one language to another. We can no longer afford ignorance.

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