

# **Language and Society: An Approach to Language Learning**

**Foreign Language Advisory Group and Language Teaching Faculty, Harvard University**

**May 12, 2008**

**Humphrey Tonkin (tonkin@hartford.edu)**

The question of broadening the field of language learning has been with us for many years. Twenty years ago, in an article entitled “Grassroots and Treetops: Collaboration in Post-secondary Language Programs,” I described a conference that my colleagues and I had convened back in 1978 at the University of Pennsylvania on foreign languages and international studies. At the time, the work of the President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies was underway, and we made the decision that it would be useful to talk with Penn faculty about the issues being addressed by the Commission.

We were worried that foreign language faculty from the larger departments would not participate in the conference, viewing the combination of foreign language and international studies as the business of area studies programs rather than language and literature departments. But in the event we had a good turnout. “This was the first time,” I wrote, “that many of them had sat down with their colleagues in the social sciences to discuss common problems – or, to put the matter more precisely, to talk about whether they might conceivably have some problems in common.” My 1987 article suggested that in the intervening ten years the situation had changed profoundly and that foreign language faculty had found their voices. There was far more cooperation than there had been before, and various programs linking foreign language and international studies had emerged at numbers of institutions. At Penn, for example, a program that I was instrumental in setting up, the Lauder Institute, offered a combined MA/MBA program in language and business. Several colleges and universities were offering at least a few courses outside the language departments actually taught in foreign languages, and a movement to broaden the range of offerings in foreign language departments was going forward.

But one major problem remained, I wrote in 1987: “Despite the value of literary study, one of the greatest handicaps of the language teaching faculties in colleges and universities, at least in the European languages, is the nature of their training. Even the perturbations and new directions in language study over the past ten years [I was writing about the period 1978-87] have done little to redirect doctoral programs – themselves in the hands of literary specialists – away from an exclusive focus on literature, nor is the often meager training in linguistics that doctoral students receive sufficiently broadly based.” I suggested that this shortcoming made newly minted Ph.D.’s often quite ignorant of language teaching techniques and put them in a situation in which they were expected to teach foreign language students of all disciplinary stripes on the basis of a largely literary training.

This led to a further problem, I suggested: “Most college teachers of foreign languages ... identify with high culture, with normative and standard language use, with the metropolis. While many come to discover the complexity and variety of the societies whose languages they

profess, the thrust of their knowledge and loyalties is centripetal rather than centrifugal: they are in effect paid to produce students who look and sound as much as possible like well educated and prosperous citizens of the countries whose language they speak. That is, after all, part of the purpose of language learning: to socialize the student into another culture.” My argument was not that this procedure should cease. The politics of language in education are quite clear: educational institutions teach students skills that will help them succeed – standard language, elite values, the attributes that will allow for acceptance and social reward. This is why education is the locus of so much political contentiousness. But we should at the very least follow this course with full knowledge of what we are doing – and we should give our students an understanding of the context in which they are learning and the context of what they learn.

The possibility that foreign languages might break out of the comfortable range of language-and-literature studies, which seemed desirable twenty and thirty years ago, seems as unlikely today as it ever did. More likely is a kind of gradualism, involving a more and more accommodating range of foreign language offerings at the undergraduate level for students with a variety of disciplinary interests. In part, students are achieving this breadth today in spite of foreign language departments – by double majors in a foreign language and some other discipline, or by a combination of another major with a minor in foreign language. Among my current students is a student who is majoring in insurance in our business school, but who has spent two protracted stays in study abroad in Spain and will receive a minor in Spanish. Another is interning in an immigration court, plans eventually to go on to law school, and has also studied abroad. Neither of these students has a burning interest in literature and both have used study abroad as a device to accumulate credits in fields other than literary studies. Both are also quite competent Spanish speakers. Students such as these deserve more attention from our foreign language colleagues, but that will only happen as these colleagues diversify into a range of disciplines and form alliances with other units of their colleges or universities. And that, in turn, will only happen as Ph.D. programs diversify, along with those who teach in them. But such diversification is hard to achieve in the economic and political climate of the average university.

Since 1988, we have not witnessed a revolution but we have made progress in broadening our offerings. More attention is given to linguistics in the training of graduate students in foreign languages, and a greater effort to give them cultural competence as well as communicative competence is underway. However, the number of undergraduate students studying major European languages other than Spanish and perhaps Italian has been declining, jobs have accordingly dried up and majors have been closed at many institutions. Given this context, a couple of years ago the Modern Language Association formed an Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, whose report received broad attention when it was published early last year.

The MLA report describes language teaching and learning as occupying a continuum, from principally instrumental (“a skill to use for communicating thought and information”) to a situation in which “language is understood as an essential element of a human being’s thought processes, perceptions, and self-expressions; and as such it is considered to be at the core of translingual and transcultural competence.” The instrumental approach, the report suggests, is the province of “freestanding language schools and some campus language-resource centers ... whereas university and college foreign language departments tend to emphasize the constitutive aspect of language and its relation to cultural and literary traditions, cognitive structures, and

historical knowledge.” The goal of the latter, the report suggests, is to achieve “translingual and transcultural competence” in the target language: “Students are taught critical language awareness, interpretation and translation, historical and political consciousness, social sensibility, and aesthetic perception.”

There is a degree of wishful thinking in this report, and also a sense that the report is fighting a rearguard action against the instrumentalists – those who want to teach students competence in a foreign language so that they can go out and use it for purposes unrelated to linguistic and literary studies, maybe even to the study of culture. Michael Holquist, President of the MLA, delivered a withering attack in the Summer 2007 issue of the MLA Newsletter against DULAP, the “instrumentalist” program developed at Drake University and now being introduced at a number of member colleges of the Council of Independent Colleges. He described it as an approach whose end is “a Berlitz-type trade school.” The truth, however, is that many students are using their colleges’ foreign language departments in very much this way – and that they are certainly using study abroad for this purpose. While I agree with Holquist that pushing foreign language departments aside in favor of a cheaper option is not a good idea, I am not convinced that we can afford to ignore the desire of many students to learn foreign languages because they want to use them – a desire that would be unexceptionable in anything other than the heated political climate of a profession that feels itself increasingly beleaguered.

This is not to say that we are well equipped to follow every trend that our hapless foreign-policy establishment feels obliged to pursue. The language needs of the US Government are best served by comprehensive support for foreign language education in general rather than by using universities as supply lines for language specialists. Furthermore, so much of what the Government regards as necessary in the field of languages is based not on understanding other people for purposes of cooperation but on keeping the homeland secure from enemy attack. This is language-as-eavesdropping, language-as-surveillance, language for the purpose of interrogation – the very opposite of what we might try to achieve in cultivating a healthy environment for foreign languages in colleges and universities. A recent conference paper by Leah Mason reporting the results of a content analysis of two reports on language needs, one by the European Union and the other by the US Government, offers a devastating indictment of American shortsightedness in its approach to language priorities.

Despite its limited scope, the MLA report is nonetheless a milestone in the politics of foreign language education at the college level in this country, and it offers hope that major universities will continue the process of broadening their offerings and their training of graduate students. However, it does not go far enough. Its description of the ideal foreign-language training (critical language awareness, interpretation and translation, historical and political consciousness, social sensibility, aesthetic perception) looks suspiciously like the Oxford tradition of Greek and Latin studies a century ago – a noble tradition indeed, but inadequate to our present needs.

In my article twenty years ago I entered a plea not for wider coverage of the cultural and political context of the target language, as the MLA report suggests, but for something more radical, more fundamental, and in my opinion utterly necessary for a student of foreign language of any kind of sophistication – namely an understanding of the function of language itself. I refer not to cognitive linguistics or general linguistics, or indeed to any other field of linguistics per se, but to

the social setting of language. It has always seemed to me extraordinary that the phenomenon of language – as a mode of social behavior and as an institution – is accorded so little attention by those in other fields. The student of mass communication who looks at the role of language systems in the world is something of a rarity – as though the variable of language did not exist. The student of politics seldom gives much attention to language difference; the same is notably true of the sociologist. While I acknowledge that that situation is changing, thanks to the work of non-linguists like Bourdieu on language and symbolic power or De Swaan on world language systems, few of our colleagues seem at all attuned to the significance of language differences either for their studies or for those who work in their fields. Among recent publications, historian Peter Burke's recent book on languages and communities in early modern Europe breaks more new ground than it ought to have to do; anthropologist Joseph Errington's study of language in colonial Indonesia is more startlingly new than it should have to be.

This omission is in part a consequence of a retreat from language knowledge on the part of scholars in recent years – a retreat stimulated by the advance of English and the increasing assumption that all knowledge exists in English: the rest is just information. When two colleagues from Chile and Germany gave a panel at the recent meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Boston, we created a minor sensation when we suggested that scientists routinely discriminate against speakers of other languages and stack their citation indexes and lists of major world universities in favor of English.

That is why we need to teach ourselves and our colleagues a lot more about the function of language. Language is a political tool, an instrument of power, and an economic force – considerations a lot more real to those on the receiving end than it is to those who speak the world's most powerful language.

For the past several years I have been teaching a capstone course for our majors and minors in foreign languages entitled "Language and Society." The course is also open to students from other disciplines. Currently a colleague, Timothy Reagan, and I are also working on a textbook on the subject. The goal of the course is to provide the students with what might best be described as a macrosociolinguistic understanding of languages. And it is posited on the assumption that some form of multilingualism can provide a viable framework for global communication: the triumph of English is neither fully desirable nor entirely achievable. While the course gives some consideration to more traditional sociolinguistics, of the kind addressed by Suzanne Romaine in her book *Language in Society* (which we use as a reader for the course), it moves beyond this fairly conventional examination of multilingualism to take in a broader range of topics.

The course covers a very wide range of topics, in a fashion that some might regard as superficial. But I want the students to understand the expansiveness of the study of language, and also the limitations of the formal study of standard language. I want them to understand that languages, particularly standard or elite codes, are in some sense artificial constructs, born of prescriptivism reinforced by educational systems, bureaucracies, and the conventions of written language. I want them to know that people treat languages in very different ways, and that European and European-derived notions of language loyalty mean very little to many users of language across

the world. The goal is to question received assumptions and to recontextualize the experience of language learning.

The course begins with an assignment in which each student is asked to write his or her linguistic autobiography. Although they may not think so at first, almost all students turn out to have had some contact with languages other than English – through family members, through contacts at school or at work, through classroom instruction, or in a host of other ways. With a little prodding, they pull this information together. I then share it with the other students and we try to identify something in each student's experience that will help shed light on the material covered in the course. I encourage students to follow up on such information, perhaps by talking with family members, or by conducting some elementary linguistic observation, or in any other ways that engage them. Students are also asked to keep journals, in which they note down any interesting information that they come upon, language situations in which they find themselves, and so on.

To give the students a start on the topic of the course, I provide them with a glossary of a hundred terms drawn from linguistics, the study of language policy and planning, sociolinguistics, and so on. I also give them a brief review of the topic of language and society that I prepared some years ago for the use of teachers. The two serve to whet their appetite and give them some elementary information at the start.

We proceed by reading the section on popular ideas about language in David Crystal's *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, and we talk and read about the role of language in communication, the nature of human language, and the structure of language (a subject on which the language students tend to have some information already). We go on to review the sections of Crystal's encyclopedia that deal with the languages of the world, spending some time on geolinguistics and genetic and areal linguistics and examining the rather unstable distinction between language and dialect. I also touch on child language acquisition and language learning because these topics are not covered elsewhere in the foreign language curriculum and because they seem to me essential.

We are now ready to move on to slightly more complex issues, beginning with the question of language choice (who uses what language under what circumstances, and why), which in turn opens up the general topic of bilingualism and multilingualism. I point out that a majority of the world's inhabitants is to some degree bilingual, and that even within our own language we use different registers for different occasions. I encourage students to explore their own language use and that of their friends, noting down interesting information in their journals.

We return then to some basics: language and gender, the four language-learning competences (speaking, listening, reading, writing), differences between spoken and written language. These prepare us to discuss language and identity – a topic that in turn raises questions of language and nationhood and language loyalty.

This topic allows us to go on to discuss issues related to languages in contact – language spread and language shift, for example; code-switching; language change; pidgins and creoles; language death. We begin to consider languages as constituting a huge world language system in which

languages are constantly jockeying for position, and in which lesser languages orbit around stronger languages in regional groupings. We examine the role of English in the world and its likely prospects in the future.

As a response to what some would call the hegemonic power of English, we review the history and present status of language rights and the growth of minority language movements. We examine language and colonialism and linguistic imperialism. By this time we have sufficient knowledge to be able to construct a coherent definition of language policy and to explore its near-relative language planning. Since I edit the scholarly journal *Language Problems and Language Planning*, this is a topic that is particularly close to my own scholarly interests. It includes, of course, the important topic of language standardization – and also language cultivation, particularly in small minority languages. And it involves not only language in other countries but also language here in the United States.

At this point I introduce the concept of interlingualism – procedures for managing language difference. They include human translation and interpretation (we spend some time on translation theory), language learning, the use of a planned language like Esperanto, and reliance on language technology. We review the pros and cons of each.

At the end of the course I ask the students how the course may have changed the way in which they look at language. “Before I took this course,” wrote one student recently, “I was not aware that language was something that could affect almost every aspect of life from large-scale societal issues to individual experiences with language.” Another student observed that she had not understood the close relationship between language and class before; another pointed out that in her language training she had never grasped the implications of register in language, and the concept of idiolect. Above all, students repeatedly observe that they had no idea of the sheer complexity of linguistic relations across the world, in the United States, and in the countries whose languages they have studied. “I am fortunate to have finally learned about language and society,” one student wrote, but she expressed the wish that such issues be incorporated in language classes from the beginning. Nothing would please me more than to have my course become redundant.

## References

- Tonkin, Humphrey, and Jane Edwards. 1981. *The World in the Curriculum: Curricular Strategies for the 21st Century*. New Rochelle: Change Magazine Press.
- Tonkin, Humphrey. 1987. Grassroots and Treetops: Collaboration in Post-Secondary Language Programs. In John M. Darcey, ed. *The Language Teacher: Commitment and Collaboration*. Middlebury, VT: Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. 26-60.
- Tonkin, Humphrey. 1988. Beyond the Competitive Edge: The Peaceful Uses of Language Study. *Foreign Language Annals*, 21:271-77.
- Tonkin, Humphrey. 2001. Language Learning, Globalism, and the Role of English. *ADFL Bulletin* (Association of Departments of Foreign Languages), 32/2:5-9.