

Politics and Language Planning: The Importance of Legislation to Language Study

Among the most important political issues related to the language profession in the United States are questions of Language Planning. The need for developing a language-competent American society made its presence felt almost a decade ago, when public awareness of the disastrous effects of our nation's lack of ability to communicate with other people began to emerge. An issue of the *Change Magazine* wrote in 1978: "America's young face a set of new national and international circumstances about which they have only the faintest of notions. They are, globally speaking, blind, deaf and dumb: and thus handicapped, they will soon determine the future directions of this nation."

Let me illustrate some of the implications of our language incompetence by a few examples:

A man named Wellington Koo was in the United States to represent China at a Washington conference in 1921. In those pre-United-Nations days, even urbane Washingtonians were not used to foreigners on their soil, and Mr. Koo found that people did not know quite how to approach him.

One socialite he sat next to at a dinner party turned to him after some time and brightly asked, "Likee Soupee"?

Mr. Koo was tired of explanations and apologies, so he just smiled and nodded and continued with his dinner. When the meal ended, Mr. Koo was invited to say a few words to the guests. He agreed and spoke for 20 minutes – in flawless English. (Obviously learned at Georgetown University).

In his seat again, he noticed his condescending neighbor had blushed a deep red and was now silent. With eguanimity, Mr. Koo turned to her and asked, "Likee speechee?"

When President Carter was in Poland, his wish to "learn your opinions and your desires for the future" came out in translation "I desire the Poles Carnally."

Body by Fisher, describing a general motors product, came out "Corpse by Fisher" in Flemish, and that did not help sales. Schweppes Tonic was advertised in Italy as "bathroom water." Cue Toothpaste, a Colgate-Palmolive product, was advertised in France with no translation errors, but cue happens to be the name of a widely-circulated pornographic book there about oral sex, and the ads produced laughs rather than sales. The laundry soap ad in Quebec promised users "clean genitals." "*Come alive with Pepsi*" almost appeared in the Chinese version of the *Reader's Digest* as "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave." In the German edition of the magazine, the ad said, "come alive out of the grave." A major ad campaign in green did not sell in Malaysia, where green symbolizes death and disease. An airline operating out of Brazil advertised that it had plush "rendezvous lounges" on its jets, unaware that in Portuguese, rendezvous implied a room for making love.

When General Motors put out its Chevrolet NOVA, apparently no one thought of foreign sales. Nova, when spoken as two words in Spanish means, "It doesn't go." Not surprisingly, sales were few in Puerto Rico and Latin America. With the name hastily changed to *Caribe*, the car sold well. When Parker Pen put on a sales campaign in South America, a less than accurate Spanish translation promised buyers that the new ink used in the pen would prevent unwanted pregnancies.

Not all evidences of our scandalous incompetence in foreign languages are humorous. Indeed, it has been established that despite its position as the leader of the Free World, the United States has major deficiencies in its cross-cultural awareness which detract from its competitive edge in business abroad. In this regard, it is revealing to quote Richard N. Gardner, whose four years on the front lines of European diplomacy as the United States Ambassador to Italy, brought him to the conclusion that:

"The British, the French, the Germans and the Japanese have long understood "Public Diplomacy" and have applied resources and intelligence to programs and information, education and culture to assure the vitality of the "intellectual connection" between themselves and other societies. The United States has not. As long as this remains the case, we will lack the ability both to shape a foreign policy that takes account of the real world and to influence foreign countries in ways that are consistent with our long-term interests.

We will continue to bemoan the fact that people overseas are poorly informed about the nature of our society and our foreign policy—that so many students, workers and intellectuals in Europe, Japan and the developing countries are convinced that both the Soviet Union and the United States represent threats to their interests—and that American embassies and the American Intelligence Community are frequently taken by surprise by foreign developments (the collapse of the Shah's regime being only one dramatic example).

This is the real "window of vulnerability" about which we should be concerned—for it is contributing to the progressive political isolation of the United States."

It is also revealing in this context to quote Rose Hayden, when she was director of Government Exchange Policy for USIA, who indicated in an interview that:

"Major powers in the world consider exchanges far more important than we in securing vital national interests.

Soviet information/cultural expenditures are estimated to total some \$2 billion annually...at least four times U.S. investments in this area overall. Cuban teachers and advisors continue to inundate selected third world nations, yet in 1977 one-third fewer opportunities were granted to young Africans to pursue their studies in the United States than were available to them in 1968. We sent only seven doctoral candidates to Africa last years, three to Nigeria. In Latin America, the USSR funded 4,650 study and training exchanges in 1978 while the United States offered far fewer than half that number to civilians for serious educational purposes. The Soviet Bloc is supporting over 500 Costa

Ricans in advanced studies and other training programs. We are not offering scholarships to middle and lower class students on a scale even marginally comparable to that of the Soviet Bloc. France and the Federal Republic of Germany commit almost 1% of their national budgets to these activities; The U.S. Government only 0.1%.”

It is important to know that our awareness of the importance of language study to cross-cultural communication and international understanding came at a time when the myth of the melting pot in our country was being dispelled by a truer version of the facts, the existence of a multilingual society. Attitudes toward the role of non-English languages in American society had begun to be reexamined. Opinions were voiced that “a person living in a society whose language and culture differ from his own must be equipped to participate meaningfully in the mainstream of that society. It should not be necessary for him to sacrifice his rich native language and culture to achieve such participation. Rather, we should utilize available language skills and thought processes to foster intellectual development while developing English language proficiency.” Increasing arguments for the recognition and acceptance of multicultural and multilingual society, and concern that all children be provided with equal educational opportunity, culminated in the Bilingual Education Act of 1968.

Committed language educators supported bilingual education on the basis of the fact that the United States is a nation to whose shores have come peoples from every continent, and history records their priceless contributions. From the beginning the quality of life has been ennobled and enriched by these people, and city and village streets have resounded with the music of many languages. It is a rich heritage, one to be nurtured, encouraged, cherished.

Indeed, it has been our belief that all persons in our culturally rich and linguistically diverse nation should be provided the opportunity and be encouraged to become proficient in more than one language to a degree of mastery consonant with their need and aspiration. The learning of other languages adds new linguistic competence and cultural sensitivity to already valuable linguistic backgrounds. One language is never intended to supplant another. We hold, therefore, that all persons, whatever their linguistic and cultural background, should be encouraged to preserve that proud birthright and be given the opportunity to continue to grow in the understanding and use of it.

Those who are not proficient in English should be provided the opportunity and encouragement to become so, since English is the key -- to gaining an accurate, broad perspective on American life, to obtaining equality of educational, economic, social and political opportunity, and thereby to participating fully and freely in society. In the same way, those who are proficient only in English should have the opportunity and should be encouraged to achieve proficiency in other languages and to know and appreciate the history and cultures of other peoples. It is through the knowledge of languages and cultures that we best begin to know and comprehend the scope and significance of human experience in history, from ancient times to modern; it is through the knowledge of languages and cultures that we best learn to tolerate and appreciate cultural and linguistic

diversity at home, to understand our contemporaries abroad, and so achieve our full potential as citizens of the world.

All this thinking about language policy led to the formulation of a national agenda, specifying the language responsibilities of our nation. According to this agenda, the people of the USA have two sets of language responsibilities:

First, toward other languages:

(1) The people of the USA have an obligation to encourage the use of languages other than English, on the part of communities in the country who have or have had these languages in their repertoire.

(2) The people of the USA have an obligation to acquire languages other than English to an extent that is adequate for present and foreseeable communication needs between the USA and other parts of the world.

Second, toward English:

(3) the people of the USA have an obligation to cherish the English language in all its diversity in this country and throughout the world, so that every well-educated American may have basic knowledge of the structure and use of English, the regional, social and register variation in American English and the place of American English among the Englishes of the world.

(4) The people of the USA have an obligation to provide full opportunity for the acquisition of English by speakers of other languages within the country. This implies research and teaching in the processes of second language acquisition and in the methods of teaching English to speakers of other languages under differing conditions.

(5) The people of the USA have an obligation to see that their country plays a major role in meeting the expressed needs of other parts of the world to acquire English.

In these obligations, instruction in English for native speakers of English, as well as mother-tongue instruction for languages other than English, and the teaching of English to speakers of other languages as well as the teaching of other languages to the speakers of English all complementary components in the American language scene. They all draw upon the same sources of research findings in the language sciences, the social sciences, and education.

However, language educators were quick enough to realize that it is not enough to present programs designed to promote language studies. In order to be able to implement such programs, we must try to educate the general public about our profession and to sensitize policymakers to our needs. This cannot happen without cooperation and unity among professional organizations. Only those organizations which use their energies to produce a unified professional entity will ultimately receive the backing of the majority of teachers, of the American people, and of the government which represents them. Organization is the key to making our concerns known and to convincing policy-makers that we are indeed serious and committed.

It was precisely in this connection that the Joint National Committee for Languages (JNCL) was created. The need for unity, organization, and initiative was the primary reason why JNCL came into existence. In response to the need for a political mechanism—a lobbying arm—to inform congress and the administration of the disastrous state of language studies and international education and to act on our behalf, we also created the Council for Languages and Other International Studies (CLOIS) which later was renamed the National Council for Languages and International Studies (NCLIS).

JNCL is an organization representing 35 of the major language associations. We have a combined membership of over 200,000 language professionals in all areas of the field, including English as a Second Language, Interpretation and Translation, Bilingual Education and the Classics. The JNCL was created out of a professional concern that language training and the study of international affairs, while basic educational priorities, have never received adequate support or recognition as an essential component of school curriculum. The committee JNCL thus serves as a forum for cooperation and discussion among the major language associations and also seeks to provide substantive information about language study.

By focusing public awareness on the issue of foreign language training, the JNCL functions a point of reference for the planning of national language policies and the identification of national needs in this area. Through its constituency for the promotion of foreign language training while simultaneously linking foreign language and international studies with broader educational and global concern.

The sister organization of JNCL is the National Council for Languages and International Studies (NCLIS). NCLIS is really the “action arm” for the organizations of JNCL, and it provides the mechanism for linking the language-teaching profession with the international studies community. It is registered under the federal “Regulation of Lobbying Act” as the medium through which to maintain contact with legislators and sensitize them to our concerns.

Just as important, NCLIS also serves as a primary source of information about activities in Washington. It provides an information flow to and from policy-makers, and it attempts to influence policies which are important to our constituents and members. It thus serves as a continuous source of timely and relevant information. Finally, it provides a resource for member organizations to develop or enhance the ability of their internal communications networks to influence legislation and policy at the national, state, and local levels. We now have a contact in every congressional district and we are working on developing the political process. JNCL and NCLIS, in short, exist to promote languages and international studies, to facilitate joint action and discussion among the members, and to develop relationships with other concerned individuals and organizations in the public and private sectors of the nation.

As the president of JNCL/NCLIS, I am happy to say that as a result of our continuous efforts to sensitize and “educate” the policy-makers to the concerns of our

profession, we have now many laws and a significant volume of legislations supporting languages and international education. We can feel now, more than at any time before, as if we have our say in the determination of national priorities. Increasingly, our views are sought before the fact, not after decisions have already been meted out to us.

Our legislative efforts are based on the unshakeable belief that language study is of critical importance for humanity. Domestically, our abiding belief in cultural and linguistic pluralism and in equality of educational opportunity seems to unite us and to give us that special excitement and relevance. Internationally, this belief has its roots in the notion of mutual educational exchange and improved cross-cultural communication leading to social justice and world peace.

To conclude, I would like to refer to a quotation from *Mexico Visto por Sus Niño*; these lines written by a Mexican child, in *Mexico as Seen by her Children*, a book of Mexican children's art and writing.

“I ask everybody in the world and especially the Mexican people to treat one another as brothers. I wish that discrimination between people would not exist and that there would not be any more wars between the great nations of the world, because it would be a real tomb, and the end of Planet Earth. “

Out of the mouths of babes! What better proof that education is our best defense?