"THE AMERICAN MODEL": ENGLISH ONLY OR ENGAGEMENT WITH A MULTI-POLAR WORLD?

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The paper discusses language policy in the US and the lack of it. Traditional neglect and erosion of foreign language study competes against new global realities, which paradoxically—in the context of global English—require Americans to increase their knowledge of critical world languages. Foreign-language education in the US is in a state of flux, with multiple actors competing for prevalence. For example, bilingual elementary education in areas where Spanish-speaking immigrants make up significant minorities or even majorities competes against popular anti-immigrant sentiment. Government initiatives to stimulate acquisition of nationally critical languages (Mandarin, Korean, Farsi, Russian, etc.) compete against traditional (dis)interest(s) in language instruction in the K–12 (elementary, i.e., kindergarten through 12 grade) and the higher education systems. These countervailing trends unfold when it is no longer obvious that the US will remain the only superpower.

The challenges to foreign-language learning in the U.S. are formidable. Americans generally assume that English suffices for communicative needs abroad, let alone at home. This prevailing view feeds the decision-making processes in education. In the quest to slash education budgets, "dispensable" subjects are sacrificed first: art, music, and foreign language instruction. In higher education foreign-language instruction is viewed as an arcane relic to be avoided or, if possible, excised altogether.

The University of Kansas (KU) serves as an example of the changes in language education in the US and demonstrates a possible way out of the gridlock. KU has received federal funding for critical languages for decades, but has also recognized the importance of critical and less-commonly-taught languages for a forward-looking education. This example demonstrates the tug-of-war that may or may not change the way American learn and think about foreign language as they reevaluate their position in a multi-polar, globalized world.

Keywords: English, foreign language learning, language policy, the U.S.

»AMERIŠKI MODEL«: SAMO ANGLEŠČINA ALI TUDI PODREJANJE MULTIPOLARNEMU SVETU?

Članek obravnava odsotnost vsakršne jezikovne politike v ZDA. Že tradicionalna zanemarjanje in upad zanimanja za študij tujih jezikov se spopadata z novo globalno resničnostjo, ki – kako paradoksalno, glede na kontekst globalne angleščine – od Američanov zahteva vedno večje znanje pomembnejših svetovnih jezikov. Politika učenja tujih jezikov, v kateri se za prevlado borijo številni dejavniki, se nenehno spreminja. Tako imamo na primer na področjih, kjer so špansko govoreči priseljenci pomembna manjšina ali celo večina, že dvojezično osnovno šolo, čeprav se hkrati krepi odpor do priseljencev. Vladne iniciative za spodbujanje učenja nacionalno pomembnih jezikov (mandarinske kitajščine, korejščine, perzijščine, ruščine, itd.) skušajo preseči tradicionalno (ne)zanimanje za poučevanje jezikov v vrtcih, osnovnih šolah in visokem šolstvu. Ti nasprotujoči si trendi se odvijajo ravno v času, ko ni več tako zelo gotovo, da bodo ZDA tudi v prihodnosti edina velesila.

ZDA se soočajo z velikimi težavami v poučevanju tujih jezikov. Američani so na splošno prepričani, da angleščina zadošča za vse komunikacijske potrebe doma in v tujini, ta odnos pa seveda vpliva na procese odločanja v izobraževalni politiki. Tako so pri rezanju proračuna za šolstvo vedno najprej na vrsti »pogrešljivi« predmeti, kot so likovna umetnost, glasba in tuji jeziki. V visokem šolstvu poučevanje tujih jezikov še posebej velja za nekakšen nepotreben ostanek starih časov, ki ga je potrebno zatreti, še raje pa kar črtati. Univerza v Kansasu nam tako kot zgleden primer sprememb v ameriški jezikovni politiki nakazuje eno od možnih rešitev zapletenega položaja.

Ključne besede: angleščina, učenje tujih jezikov, jezikovna politika, ZDA.

Bilingual and multilingual education in the United States must be contextualized for discussion at this meeting, as the role of bilingualism and multilingualism differs in type from that of Europe, where the titular language of a state-the imagined community of which has been in many cases defined by that language-dominates (viz., the Czech Republic, France, Italy, Spain, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine), and minority languages are accorded or not accorded certain rights as a matter of policy. In the United States the founding principles of the state as it was formed in the late 18th century were focused on civic principles, rights, and duties and the matter of language was left to chance. By default, English became the language of civic discourse because its demographic predominance in the original colonies and it spread with the colonization of the American continent. From the founding to this day, there has never been and there is not now an official language policy for the United States. English is *not* the official language of the United States, though it is the de facto language of public discourse.

This is not to say that other languages were not present at the founding of the American Republic. This is far from the case: German, Dutch, and French were both spoken by minority populations; native American languages were of course spoken by indigenous populations and studied by colonists with the intention of converting the native peoples to Christianity (Smith, 1979), and Spanish was and is widely spoken in the south-west. But the European mode of thinking about language did carry over to those who concerned themselves with language standardization. As early as 1789, Noah Webster foresaw the predominance not only of English that would drive out all other languages, but of a particular variety of American English that was different from that spoken in Great Britain and would itself drive out all dialect variation (*Introduction to English Grammar*, quoted in Smith, 1979).

While the Colonial period marks the beginnings of the path of English monolingualism, the linguistic landscape of the United States today has more direct connections to the processes at the turn of the twentieth century than of the nineteenth. In 1900 nearly 14% of the US population or 10.3 million of a population of 76 million was foreign born - (since 1940 the number has been consistently under 10%)[1]. What we have come to think of as the "melting pot" has been described also with a sociolinguistic metaphor, "a Babel in reverse," by Haugen (1938 [1972]: 1). Practically speaking, with the influx of significant numbers

of immigrants, none of whom makes a territorial claim to indigenous rights to self-expression, and the focus on a civic definition of national adherence, the only logical decision was to agree on a common language. The prevailing attitude among fin-de-siècle immigrants to the United States reinforced the primary role of English: if they themselves were unable to switch to English, they insisted that their children become primarily English speakers and actively worked to accelerate the loss of their ancestral language. Similar processes characterize the language developments in Canada and Australia.

Despite the gradual reduction in the number of foreign-born citizens in the United States over the course of the twentieth century, the second half of the century is characterized by a duality in the view of non-English languages. Generally speaking, K—12 schools throughout the 20th century have offered typically two years of foreign language, including traditional languages Latin, Spanish, German, and French, with limited goals towards proficiency. Latin became gradually marginalized in the second half of the twentieth century and Spanish enrollments have dwarfed others as the emphasis on practicality prevailed: Spanish is the most widely spoken language in the United States - in the 2000 census more the 28 million or 11% of the U.S. population (over 5 years old) of 262 million was Spanish-speaking, more than all other languages combined (less than 20 million)[2]. A typical U.S. college-educated student is required to have completed two years of college-level foreign language, bringing them to what is considered the "intermediate level," which in practical terms means minimal proficiency because there has been little or no reinforcement for the use of the language outside of the classroom. In a real sense, foreign language education as it applied broadly is lip-service to the notion that a foreign language is part of a modern liberal arts education. On the other hand, on a state and local level, K–12 education in areas where significant non-English-speaking minorities are concentrated, schools are often supplied with ESL programs and some level of basic education in the primary language as a transitional solution to English-only education.

What I have said so far reinforces the view from the outside that Americans are monolingual and indeed it is easy to generalize from the sample that is seen abroad: Americans from upper-middle class families who have the means to travel are generally those who speak English only and are average products of the education system.

U.S. monolingualism is not only a result of historical development and practicality in the context of both isolationism and the influence of global English, but as a political movement it has gained new traction as a marker of national identity. In part this is reflected in the Offical English movement, begun in the early 1980s, which ostensibly promotes practicality while thinly masking anti-immigrant sentiment. Though Official English proponents (overwhelmingly Republicans) sponsor bills to declare the English the official language of the U.S. at each Congress, they have not yet progressed to legislation.

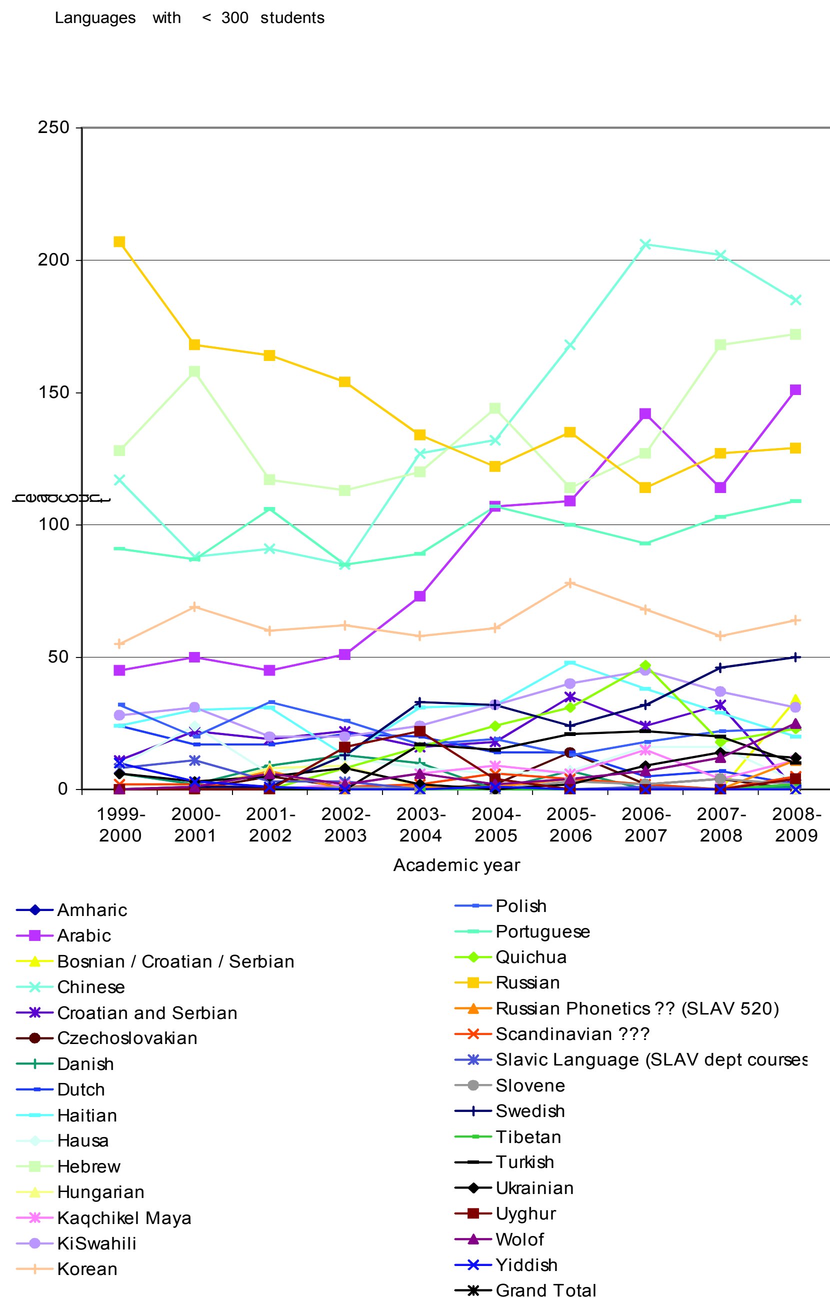
The other side of the coin is the initiative to foster the knowledge of critical languages among the best educated slice of the population. Federal initiatives have been in place for decades, for example, the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), which aims to train and maintain a cohort of educated citizens in various fields who also have advanced proficiency in critical languages. Critical languages are variously defined, but are designated at various times by U.S. federal agencies by published lists. At the current moment the National Security Education Program (NSEP) emphasizes study of non-Western European languages critical to U.S. national security, primarily the current core languages Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Indonesian, Korean, Russian, and Turkish[3]. The NDEA has previously been allocated to those who have been most likely to actually achieve advanced-level proficiency in a foreign language, therefore it has until this year been reserved for graduate-level study. Your speaker funded most of his graduate education by studying Russian and Serbo-Croatian as part of a doctoral program at both the University of Chicago and the University of California Los Angeles in the 1980s. The graduate program in Slavic languages at my university is sustained substantially by the fact that many students' educations are funded by their Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowships, supplied by Title VI (NDEA) federal government resources.

A renewed emphasis from the federal government, beginning at the end of second term of George W. Bush in the late 2000s, has come with the newly emerging U.S. doctrine of "soft power," which aims to deemphasize military intervention and to foster better understanding of "human terrain," that is, work for more effective engagement that includes using language, cultural, and area knowledge in foreign relations. This is not merely a suggestion, but one in which the federal government is injecting relatively large amounts of money, still aimed especially at the post-secondary level through programs such as NDEA (Title VI), NSEP, and the Fulbright program. The next goal appears to be to improve K–12 education, long deplored by educators as ineffective and unserious. HR 6063, introduced by Rush Holt (D-New Jersey) and Paul D. Tonko (D-New York) the ''Excellence and Innovation in Language Learning Act'' (H.R. 6036), is currently before Congress and aims to allocate $400 million for FY 2011 to K–12 language instruction.

It would be difficult to imagine that US K–12 education will start to look more like its counterparts in Europe, where knowledge of L_1 + English has become the minimum, but there is a chance that if this were ever to take place, it may be beginning now. Already there are local initiatives, where school boards and parent groups have taken advantage of foreign-based initiatives, such as the Confucius Centers, to introduce the study of Mandarin in public schools with native guest teachers. These initiatives gain parental support because they are viewed as opportunities for children to learn a language that they perceive to be economically advantageous in the future. Experimental or "magnet" schools have been developed for high-ability children who would like to study a small number of challenging languages, such as Arabic, Mandarin, or Korean, also motivated by future monetary incentive or employment advantage. At the same time, support for the study of traditional European languages, especially Latin, German, and French, has been in decline and may have already collapsed at the K–12 level.

In Kansas we have been developing institutions to grapple with language needs, but they develop slowly and are severely under-funded. At the K–12 level the Kansas in the World program has produced vision statements and initiatives that recognize the need for broad knowledge of the world and language knowledge, but the state's Kansas State Department of Education World Language and ESOL Consultant is only now able to roll out a plan to develop expertise among high school teachers to teach languages other than Spanish by training current teachers who may have learned another language to teach that language. We are still far from advancing the availability of languages beyond the minimal capacity we have at the K–12 level. For the moment, the best bet lies in higher education, where, for example, at the University of Kansas we teach more than 40 world languages, though outside of Spanish we enroll relatively few (see Figure 1, from Greenberg et al, 2009: appendix).

Figure 1: Enrollment patterns in foreign languages, University of Kansas, 1999–2009



In summary, the American model is in flux. It is informed by a historical tendency toward civic rather than national identity, therefore it is English speaking by default and not as a product of a nation-building project. Its Anglophone heritage is reinforced by its experience as an immigrant nation at the turn of the 20th century. The Cold War ushered in a pragmatic program to develop a small group of elites with language knowledge and this model is now being applied to the US in the age of heightened security and accelerated globalization. Little has changed to move from widespread monolingualism, but we live and hope.

NOTES

[1] U.S. Census Bureau http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/tab01.html [Accessed 29 August 2010].

[2] U.S. Census Bureau http://www.census.gov/population/cen2000/phc-t20/tab05.pdf [Accessed 31 August 2010].

[3] The program also includes more than 70 languages, including Albanian, Amharic, Arabic (and dialects), Armenian, Azerbaijani, Belarusian, **Bosnian**, Bulgarian, Burmese, Cantonese, Czech, Georgian, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Indonesian, Japanese, Kazakh, Khmer, Korean, Kurdish, Kyrgyz, Lingala, Macedonian, Malay, Mandarin, Mongolian, Pashto, Persian (Farsi/Dari), Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, **Serbian**, Sinhala, Slovak, **Slovenian**, Swahili, Tagalog, Tajik, Tamil, Thai, Turkish, Turkmen, Uighur, Ukrainian, Urdu, Uzbek, Vietnamese. [my emphasis] http://www.nsep.gov/students/#criticalLanguages [Accessed 1 Sept 2010].

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