

A Defense of European Languages

By Stephen Brockmann

The University of Southern California's [April announcement](#) of its plans to close its German department has sparked a discussion within American higher education about the future role of the traditional "big three" foreign languages in the United States: French, German, and Spanish. USC defended its decision with the argument that it needed to focus resources on other languages, particularly Chinese, in response to the growing importance of Asia for the world economy in general and for California in particular. In a letter to USC's president, Steven Sample, I argued that in response to obvious deficiencies in American students' foreign language preparedness, American universities need to radically increase overall investments in foreign language teaching, and that such a radical increase can not be achieved by simply shifting resources from one language to another, i.e. that enhancing language education in the United States should not be conceived of as a zero sum game.

In [an article](#) last week on *Inside Higher Ed*, H. Stephen Straight, a professor of anthropology and linguistics at the State University of New York in Binghamton, argued for precisely such a radical increase in foreign language education not only at the college but also at the primary and secondary levels. Straight contends that the U.S. should "abandon its exclusive short-range, 9/11-sparked, tactical emphasis on just-in-time, emergency-responsive study of specific languages to meet economic challenges and security crises." I could not agree more. However Straight also concedes that in spite of his own love of the French language "I do regretfully conclude that the recent and projected continuing decline of French as one of the most widely studied languages in the U.S. is both inevitable and appropriate."

I do not agree with this conclusion; in fact I believe that the traditional "big three" languages still have — and should have — a good deal of life in them. The case for Spanish is relatively easy, since it is by far the most popular foreign language in the United States, due to the proximity of Mexico and Latin America, as well as massive immigration to the United States of Spanish-speaking people. However there is also a good case to be made for French and German. As a German professor, I admittedly have a subjective interest in this matter (my love of the language and culture as well as my loyalty to my profession); but I think there are good objective arguments to be made as well.

Both the USC administration and Professor Straight argue from a primarily pragmatic economic and political standpoint, i.e. they both assume that one studies a foreign language and culture primarily because of the economic or political importance that such a language or culture has or might potentially have in the world. Therefore because China and Japan have great economic and political importance in today's world, some significant number of American students should study Chinese and Japanese. There is a good deal of persuasiveness to this argument, and undoubtedly economic and political pragmatism is one of the primary reasons why American students should study foreign languages and cultures. The world's economies are indeed becoming increasingly interconnected, and the health of every national economy is more and more dependent on its competitive success with respect to the other nations of the world. Foreign languages often have very direct benefits not only to nations but to individuals: Many of my own students, for instance, have graduated from college and gone on to work for major German companies like Siemens or Bayer.

Professor Straight is also right that it is not sufficient for a nation like the United States simply to start pushing the study of particular foreign languages *after* the need to learn them has become obvious to all. For instance, *after* 9/11 was far too late to begin pushing the study of Arabic in the United States; it would have been far preferable if American students in large numbers had been studying Arabic *before* 9/11. There is an old barnyard adage about closing the barn door after the cows have escaped that seems to me to apply to the U.S. approach to Arabic and to other languages belatedly deemed important for national security. Learning a foreign language takes many years of work and study, and that work and study need to happen before a national security catastrophe, not after it, since one of the primary goals of such work and study will naturally be to *prevent* national security catastrophes. (It doesn't matter how much intelligence data the CIA collects in Arabic if no one can read it.) Of course, even here, better late than never. But early is always better than late.

Even if one accepts a purely pragmatic and political viewpoint, however, one cannot really conclude that a 6 percent overall share of foreign language enrollments is too high for German (6 percent of the rather small 8.6 percent share of foreign languages in total college enrollments, that is: 0.005 — half of one percent). The fact is that the German economy continues to be the third largest economy in the world, with a 2006 gross national income of \$2,901,482,000,000 — closely followed by

China, which had a gross national income in 2006 of \$2,641,846,000,000. Germany is also one of the richest nations in the world per capita, with annual per capita income in 2006 working out to \$35,110, compared to China's \$2,035 per capita. The average German, therefore, is 17 times richer than the average Chinese citizen. This means that the Germans, on the whole, have more money to buy things than the Chinese. While France has a lower gross national income than Germany (\$2,256,465,000,000), it is still one of the richest countries in the world, and its per capita income is actually higher than Germany's (\$35,725). Even though the Chinese economy continues to grow, therefore, it is unlikely that it will soon outpace France and Germany combined, let alone the entire European Union. On purely pragmatic economic and political grounds alone, the study of Germany and France, and of the German and French languages, should continue to be an important part of American higher education.

Moreover, if one accepts — as I do — the premise that the United States needs to radically expand education in foreign languages and cultures for the globalized world, it is possible for German and French to maintain their *absolute* numbers of enrollments while declining *relatively* in comparison with languages like Japanese, Chinese, and Korean. The reason for that is simple: those three languages simply did not previously exist at many institutions of higher education, and therefore their emergence and growth will necessarily lead to *relative* declines in other, traditionally studied languages, but not necessarily to *absolute* declines.

However, as important and valuable as pragmatic reasons are for studying foreign languages, I do not accept the premise — whether implicit or explicit — that they are the *only* reason why one should study foreign languages. One of the most remarkable things about recent debates about foreign language education is precisely the exclusive focus on a not-very-well-defined pragmatism at the expense of a more expansive vision of liberal learning. Not so very long ago (as recently as the 1960s and even into the 1970s and 1980s) there was a general consensus in American higher education that a liberally educated student should study the best of the Western intellectual and cultural tradition, from Plato through Descartes, Kant, and Nietzsche, and that such a student should also learn at least one of the ancient or foreign languages at the core of that western tradition (Latin, Greek, French, German, Italian, and Spanish) — with English, of course, also (thanks to Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton) being a language at the core of the Western intellectual tradition. That consensus was challenged in the 1970s and 1980s by various attempts to relativize the Western intellectual tradition, as well as — far more serious, I fear — by creeping monolingualism; but nevertheless the absence of references to fundamental European intellectual traditions in the most recent debates about foreign language education is remarkable.

It is as if the late Allan Bloom had never written *The Closing of the American Mind*, a book in which — already in the 1980s — he deplored American higher education's turning away from Europe, and from European traditions. Of course Bloom was politically and philosophically conservative; but it is entirely possible to defend the study of European cultural traditions — including Europe's key languages — from a liberal point of view as well. (After all, liberalism itself *emerged* from the European intellectual tradition.) And even if all one wants to do with the academic study of European intellectual traditions (liberal, conservative, Marxist, etc.) is to criticize them, it will still be hard to argue with the proposition that of all the world's intellectual traditions, it is the Western one that has had the most profound impact on the world today — for good or for ill. It was in the West that Christianity emerged; it was in the West that capitalism emerged; it was in the West that democracy emerged; it was in the West that colonialism and imperialism emerged; and it was in the West that Communism emerged.

Given the centrality of European intellectual traditions to the world's history, it seems to me that there continues to be a very powerful case for *studying* these traditions, as well as the primary languages at their core. If we do not commit ourselves to the study and teaching of these traditions, we are leaving our students ill-equipped to understand them, and therefore ill-equipped to understand how today's world has been shaped at its very core. This seems to me to be the most important intellectual and educational reason for studying the key European languages. It is not an argument *against* the study of Asian, African, or American Indian languages, which ought to be encouraged as well; it is simply an argument *for* the study of European languages. Again, I do not see the study of languages as a zero-sum game, and Americans would do well not to think in these terms either.

But there are at least three other very good reasons for studying foreign languages. The first is that, quite simply, foreign languages are a lot of fun. Over the last decade and a half there has been one formerly less-studied European language that has grown considerably: Italian. Why? Is it because of Italy's pragmatic political and economic significance? Probably not — although Italy's economy is hardly to be sneered at from a global perspective. Is it because of Italy's cultural significance as part of the European core? Possibly. (I can imagine no more beautiful depiction of medieval Catholic cosmography than Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and after all that is the cosmography that immediately preceded the modern one.) But even more, I

suspect, it is because Italy and the Italian language are perceived as beautiful, fun, and sexy. And why not? I can't see anything wrong with that.

The second good reason why one studies a foreign language is to go abroad and live in a place where the language is spoken. And here too Europe seems to me to have considerable advantages over a good many of its competitors: It is safe, comfortable, has a good infrastructure, and is welcoming to foreigners. Europe provides an experience of foreignness and openness to the world that is very important for young Americans today, but it does so in a relatively safe and unthreatening way; it is, in a sense, a gateway to the larger world. And French wine and German beer (and cars) will continue to be powerful draws to our students, whether we like it or not.

Finally, one should never underestimate the role that ethnic and cultural heritage play in students' choice of foreign languages: It is probably no coincidence that German has traditionally been one of the "big three" languages, given that German-Americans were traditionally the largest ethnic group in the United States. Such ties continue to play a role well into the fourth and fifth generations: I still get large numbers of students with German surnames in my German language and culture courses. I suspect that such ethnic and cultural reasons — which also, by the way, enter into the growth of Chinese and Japanese enrollments in the U.S. — will apply in the future almost as much as they have applied in the past, given Americans' avid interest in their genealogy and ethnic heritage.

There is a final reason for studying European languages, and it is fairly straightforward: European languages are easier for native speakers of English to learn than non-European languages because they are genetically related to English. All foreign languages are difficult, but some foreign languages are more difficult than others. It takes a native speaker of English a good one-two years of additional study and hard work to become proficient in a non-European language than in a European language. If our goal is to encourage widespread foreign language proficiency in a realistic way, then we should encourage students first to learn a European language (and thus get the knack of learning any foreign language at all) and then to take on the added difficulty of studying a non-European language. This may seem like a trivial argument at an abstract level, but in the real world of actual language teaching and learning, difficulty plays a huge role that many language teachers may not like to talk about, but of which students are well aware.

For all these reasons the European languages will continue to play — and should continue to play — an important role in American higher education. Above all it is important for us to understand that a really massive increase in focus on foreign languages and cultures — and there can be little doubt that we need such an increase — will necessitate not shifting resources from "old" languages to "new" ones but rather enhancing foreign language study overall. The United States has seen enough either-or, zero-sum thinking about foreign languages; it is time to change our approach.

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