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Invited colloquium: Foreign languages in an age of globalization

Presented at the AAAL 2012 Annual Meeting in Boston, 24 March 2012.

With the advent of globalization and the increasingly multilingual and multicultural nature of nations, institutions and classrooms, the fundamental nature of foreign language instruction is changing. Such traditional notions as: 'native speaker', 'target culture', 'standard L2' are becoming problematic with the influx of immigrants to industrialized nation-states, the diversification of accents, and the stratification of language varieties. Foreign language classrooms, too, are becoming less and less homogenous: lacking common points of reference in a common L1, students have to learn the L2 without any common prior cultural or historical context. Caught between the need to impart a skill that will be 'usable' in a variety of global settings and the desire to develop an L2 academic literacy that is specific to a given national culture, foreign language study is challenged to reconcile the local and the global, its national premise and its transnational entailments. This colloquium explored the changing nature of the challenges facing the teaching and learning of foreign languages in an age of global information technologies, global job market, and global migrations. In particular it focused on the notion of the 'foreign' in foreign language education and how globalization has affected this foreignness.

In his paper, 'Domesticating the foreign: Globalization's effects on the place/s of languages' Joseph LoBianco (University of Melbourne) reflected on the fate and prospects of languages and their labeling in the Australian setting. While Australia sees itself as a mediator between China and the US/Europe, it feels unprepared for the 'Asian century'. With its resource-rich, vast open spaces, its culture of opportunity, democracy, and freedom, it is thought to be well placed to play a crucial role in the Asian century but it sees itself like a European whale 'beached' in Asia: well-endowed but inappropriately nourished, needing to reform itself in 'Asia literacy'. As Chinese policy makers are vigorously enforcing the teaching of compulsory English in China as a 'basic skill' from grade 3 onward, with an emphasis on interpersonal communication, Australian policy makers still struggle with the status of Chinese: Should Chinese be taught as a culturally foreign language? As an Australian heritage language? Or as a basic skill and global language?

Li Wei and Zhu Hua (Birbeck College, University of London) considered the Chinese challenge from another angle. In 'Geopolitics and the changing hierarchies of the Chinese language: Policies and practices of Chinese language teaching in the era of globalization' they reviewed the ongoing changes in the social hierarchies between Cantonese and Putonghua, especially in the learning of Chinese by British Chinese children. The Chinese government

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is investing substantially in the promotion of Chinese worldwide through various cultural and educational organizations such as the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms. In the UK, Cantonese, the traditional community lingua franca, is fast being replaced by Putonghua. All Cantonese heritage schools for Chinese children now teach Putonghua, but none of the Putonghua schools teaches Cantonese. Mainstream schools and universities now treat Cantonese-first-language-speaking ethnic Chinese pupils and students as foreign. Li Wei and Zhu Hua discussed the implications for policy and practice with regard to foreign language teaching and the education of Chinese children in the UK, as well as the theoretical understanding of multilingualism.

In 'Teaching Hebrew and Arabic in Israel: Asymmetries and inequalities', Elana Shohamy and Iair G. Or (Tel Aviv University) focused on a geopolitical challenge of equally great concern, namely the unequal status of Hebrew and Arabic in Israeli schools. While the more formal and biblical Hebrew learned by Arabs precludes them from conducting genuine negotiations of meaning and developing meaningful communicative competence with Hebrew speakers, the teaching of Arabic, which is grammar-based and relies heavily on military vocabulary and cultural stereotypes, does not enable Jewish speakers to really communicate with Israeli Arabs. The result is that Jews attain a very low level of proficiency in Arabic and alienate themselves from the region, and Arabs do not have the proficiency in Hebrew that would enable them to study at Israeli universities. Hebrew and Arabic speakers are both underprivileged and are 'foreign' to one another.

The fourth contribution, by Rick Kern (UC Berkeley), 'The Internet bubble: What electronically mediated communication is and isn't doing for foreign language learning', addressed yet another challenge to foreign language education. Globalization and the internet have greatly diversified the kinds of opportunities open to language learners for intercultural contact. Telecollaboration, social networking, online forums, massively multiplayer online games, collaborative writing and editing, and multimodal production tools all provide opportunities for new kinds of social interaction, new kinds of communities, and new kinds of learning environment. But are these social contexts really new? Kern's main question was: 'What does it mean to mediate the foreign through familiar media?' The internet not only filters and transforms information, but also makes it difficult to contextualize meanings. For example, in telecollaboration through Skype, students can easily view others as being 'just like them'. However, the technology can also make it possible to defamiliarize the familiar and lead to new places.

The final contribution 'Foreign languages and the need for content on a globalized campus', was by Michael Geisler (Middlebury College, USA), President of the oldest intensive immersion language program in the United States: the Middlebury Summer Language School. Globalization, he said, is forcing us to ask such questions as: What, except for linguistic proficiency, do students actually acquire by taking a foreign language class? What do foreign language departments and faculty contribute to the general curriculum? How do foreign language faculty themselves model the skill set advocated by, for example, the 2007 MLA Report (MLA 2007)? How is a global or international agenda actually reflected in the content of foreign language courses? Geisler urgently argued that contextualized cultural content is critical if foreign languages want to claim a seat at the globalization table. In his view, the field of Applied Linguistics has a large role to play in making this possible.

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The discussant at this colloquium was Sally Magnan (University of Wisconsin-Madison). In her mind, these papers challenged four concepts that have been central to foreign language instruction since the beginning: What is foreign? What is communication? What is culture? What might constitute teaching? Referring to the 5Cs of the National Standards (ACTFL 1996), Magnan considered in turn whether the classroom with four walls and one teacher had become inadequate in light of the new technologies; how we are to train teachers to impart international awareness to their students; how we are to conceive of assessment if the usual linguistic and cultural norms are put into question; and how language educators are best to influence policy makers.

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Symposium: Methodologies in SLA

Two panel discussions presented at the Second Language Acquisition Graduate Student Symposium on 29 and 30 April 2011 at the University of Iowa.

1. Background

The 2011 symposium, co-hosted by the University of Iowa (UI) and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison) continued the stimulating discussion of research methodologies at the previous year's symposium.

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