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From “Foreign Languages” to “World Languages” within U.S. Institutions: Abandoning Misleading Terminologies

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In the U.S., the social unrest and pandemic-induced hardships of 2020-21 implore Americans to critically examine our relationship to society’s most vulnerable or marginalized members. We must be honest in our assessments about how our identities and positions impact them. Educators who seek to internationalize their learners are not exempt from such self-reflection.

“Foreign language” learning is a crucial component of an internationalizing education, yet the term itself is highly problematic, particularly for people living in a multilingual country like the United States. Dictionary definitions never fully capture the range of societal values embedded within a word. A general meaning of “foreign” is that something is not of that place; it somehow does not belong there, not wholly, or legitimately.

Turning then to “foreign” language, it becomes clear that “foreign” is reflective of and reinforces an epistemological hierarchy in which English is positioned as native and all other languages are positioned as foreign. Not only does this hierarchy marginalize the millions of citizens and residents of the U.S. who use languages other than English alongside it, but it constitutes a historical inaccuracy. Modern English is not native to North America; it developed out of Old English, which developed out of Germanic languages in Europe. Moreover, the United States has never been a monolingual country, not before or after removing Indigenous peoples from their land or importing enslaved humans to work these lands. To imply the (non-English) languages of Indigenous peoples were—and remain—foreign seems self-contradictory.

The U.S. has no official language, despite the actions of individual states. As some states have adopted measures that officialize English, others have taken steps to repeal such measures (Kaur, 2020). Officializing a language, of course, does not render all other languages foreign, only non-official. Neither is a language native by virtue of it being spoken by the majority of a given country’s citizens. Were this the case, French would be non-native, i.e. foreign, to Canada, and Mayan dialects would be foreign to Mexico, given that these languages are spoken by a minority of these countries’ respective populations – both laughable propositions in those countries.

Positioning non-English languages as foreign within the U.S. context also implies that monolingualism is normative for membership in this nationality. Any second language – other than English in this case—is non-native, and thus positioned as alien and extraneous to the national identity. In other words, in this configuration, monolingualism is native and natural, and bilingualism is un-native and unnatural. Bilingualism then becomes something foreign rather than a legitimate identity of millions of Americans. It also communicates to learners of a “foreign

language” that languages other than English have no application inside the U.S. This implication assaults reality and would mislead our learners.

“Foreign” languages are spoken abroad, but not exclusively abroad. Most glaringly, the United States may move up from its second-place ranking to become the country with the world’s largest Spanish-speaking population within the near future (Grajales-Hall, 2011). According to the 2010 U.S. census data, 350 different languages were spoken in homes across the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). In this view, the constructs of “foreign” and its companion “native” need to be problematized as more political constructs than ones reflecting a historical or cultural reality. Otherwise, it would seem the only non-foreign (native) languages of the United States would be Cherokee, Ojibwe, Sioux, etc.

Thinking critically about “foreign” languages within the United States connects with global issues of nationalism, cultural diversity, and initiatives to impose homogeneity on societies. The same nativist impulse behind efforts to position English as the sole native language of the U.S. can be found elsewhere, of which learners should be aware. Locally, unpacking these terms reveals their harmful implications on bilingual individuals living in the United States and on English Language Learners (ELLs). If, for example, a language that an Arab-American speaks and the identity enveloping it, Arabic, is “foreign”, then either the speaker is also somehow foreign, or they perform a foreign action every time an Arabic word leaves their lips. Rather than discouraging bilingualism, governments and institutions need to recognize multilingual individuals and ELLs as sources of rich skill sets and knowledge and find ways to involve their contributions into the development of their and their peers’ intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). Hopefully, more respectful relationships will result in a more inclusive society.

Educators promoting internationalization should take great pride in the service they provide their communities. Yet we must continue to grow and to become better versions of ourselves. Institutions in the U.S. that offer the study of “foreign” languages should critically reevaluate the terminologies used throughout their institutions. Those that choose to continue using the terminology of “foreign languages” will continue to ignore complex linguistic realities and become complicit in the promulgation of inaccurate and damaging perspectives. More inclusive terms could be adopted, like “world language”, a term defined by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2017). Institutions should seize this historic moment and rethink inherited epistemologies that had previously escaped critical evaluation.

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