The Plagued Life of Language in American Society: 
Attitudes Toward Foreign Language

A thesis submitted to the Miami University 
Honors Program in partial fulfillment of the 
requirements for University Honors

by

Erika Nicole Walton

May 2004
Oxford, Ohio
ABSTRACT

THE PLAGUED LIFE OF LANGUAGE IN AMERICAN SOCIETY: ATTITUDES TOWARD FOREIGN LANGUAGE

by Erika Nicole Walton

This thesis explores Americans’ perceptions of the value of knowing and studying a foreign language. The attitudes toward foreign languages have a direct impact on the cultural awareness and tolerance in today’s purported global society. This argument is grounded upon the ideas of complacency, denial and isolation, all which add to an ethnocentric attitude. By combining personal experiences of travel abroad and other anecdotes the nature of communication and foreign languages appears.
Approval page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following individuals who assisted me throughout my thesis:

Frances Fowler, advisor
Carolyn Haynes
Brenda Helmbrecht, reader
Elisabeth Hodges
Kathleen Knight-Abowitz
Lynette Unger, reader
Leslie Smutz
Amanda Spector
Fred & Barbara Walton
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Life and Death of Language</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complacency</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion – Implications for the Future</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Plagued Life of Language in American Society:

Attitudes toward Foreign Language

I clench my muscles as my legs touch the warm, sticky, orange plastic of a Paris Metro bench. As I choke on a thrust of hot, polluted air from the passing metal beast, I think about how my mother and father would not delight in the fact that I am alone in the metro station at 22 heures. I see an underground world of the transit system. The foreign metropolis faithfully offers me a chance to observe and critique life, not fear it.

I hover over each word that expounds from the mouths of those around me. Qu’est-ce que tu fait ce weekend? Je ne sais pas. N’importe quoi. I understand. What are you doing this weekend? I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. Each word marches into my brain, while I half-translate half-automatically understand what is said. Je comprends. I do not know the motivation for the words, but I snatch the statements while they float through the heavy air. I am not scared of this underground maze.

* * *

A whip of frigid air smacks my already dry cheeks as the automatic doors of the Chicago L-train careen together. The dry air perforates my vision. I force my eyelids closed and strain to open them, forging a path to a vacant seat. My mother and father would not delight in the fact that I am alone in the train at 10:00 pm. The night crawlers are out. Yet I am not scared to be on my own, and salivate over the chance to spy on the
train conversations of several different languages. *Yo quiero uno perro. Este trem è lento!* *Questo treno è lento!*

I sit on each utterance as the metal box traverses over the maze of Chicago streets. The words slide into my ears. I try to imagine what the mélange of syllables really means. My game of imagination comforts my solitude. I am not by myself. The exchanges create another body for me. The members of a conversation are not always obvious, yet communication includes the speaker and the listener. Listeners can be the silent partners of a conversation.

Communication, so uncomplicated in its purpose, becomes frenetic in its use. The populace of the metro and train generates innumerable noises, sounds, and gestures to connect. This connection becomes useless when the two dependent subjects do not maintain compatible communication systems, or languages. Further complicating this incongruity is the resistance to learn the fitting measures, languages, to engage in communication. Only the exploitation of energy and thought are necessary.

I am writing from my American perspective. Americans speak the English language, the official fallback language, the official compatibility component. This distrustful perception encourages a blind assumption of the language and ignorance towards other languages and cultures. Americans’ expectation for everyone to speak English while in their presence places them at a disadvantage. Those inhabiting one of the most powerful and enterprising countries in the world depend upon the other member of the conversation – or even a translator -- to know what people say. The clout, the body, the mass of one word is insignificant if someone else cannot appreciate it. An
English-only speaking American can bellow a declaration of war or peace to someone who speaks only Arabic and Korean, but will roar no meaning.

Understanding why Americans perceive English as an omnipotent solution to all communication will reveal the linguistic and cultural implications of the American society. Inherently, the collective American culture portrays an ideology that demands other cultures and societies to cater to its linguistic needs. While clustering a population of millions under one stigma is a generalization, this is the way outsiders perceive Americans’ actions. I discovered this prevalent belief while studying in France for five months. As a French minor and a marketing major with strong interests in foreign affairs, discovering the American English language identity intrigues me. Also, growing up in Ohio, Wisconsin, Georgia, and Indiana sparked my interest in different cultures and societies. Using my own experience as primary research in addition to scholarly, secondary research, I want to determine what factors contribute to this crisis and what future actions can occur to ameliorate this communication discrepancy.

This study will use the philosophical examination of how language and culture evolve from ideas expressed in Milton J. Bennett’s, “Towards Ethnorelativism: A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity” (1993). Bennett, a socio-cultural scholar, examines how a culture living within itself reproduces cultural ignorance, while it improves itself if it seeks the cultural implications of different lifestyles. Examining features of ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism, Bennett explains one foundation of the relationship proposed between languages and cultures. Bennett defines “ethnocentrism” as “assuming that the worldview of one’s own culture is central to all reality” (10).
“Ethnorelativism,” as Bennett describes it, is “the assumption that cultures can only be understood relative to one another and that particular behavior can only be understood within a cultural context” (26). As language maintains an enduring affiliation with culture, it is necessary to study language as a factor dependent on its culture. A culture does not exist without a language. Language communicates the idiosyncrasies of a culture, yet it should not segregate itself from other cultures. Language should be a distinguishing factor, just as other cultural features.

As Bennett’s thesis states, languages capture an aspect of a culture. For example, a French-speaker in Southern France speaks in a similar tongue to a French-speaker in Morocco, even though the two cultures are strikingly different. It is not feasible to state that everyone who speaks the same language bears the same cultural ideals and peculiarities. However, one can maintain the supposition that the two cultures can speak, can connect.

Fearing a culture because of the unknown immediately sets an individual against fully embracing a language. Emblazoned stereotypes deter one from filtering through the rubbish of ignorance. It is not wrong to disagree with a statement of belief. It is, however, iniquitous to refuse to listen or attempt to understand beliefs. Ignoring language barriers by hoping that someone out there can understand the empty words you utter is to be blind. Richard Rodriguez, a proponent of speaking a country’s language in public while using other languages at home as a private language, advocates that Americans must recognize their culture while interacting with others (183). The
relationship between language and culture must be recognized and understood by the American population.

This study follows the progression of actions that lead to ethnocentrism, which is one factor in the argument about foreign languages in America. I do not address bilingual education, as I am not calling for America’s schools to teach in multiple languages. I advocate the instruction of foreign languages. Learning how to speak another language should be like learning math, science, or reading: compulsory. The accumulation of knowledge for present or future use is valuable. While I have taken French courses for nearly ten years, I did not use French with French-speakers on a daily basis until last year. Students’ contact and experiences with a foreign language will influence their cultural perceptions. If students learn a foreign language and have peers whose first language was not English, there could be a greater chance of peer-to-peer learning, as well as tolerance for differences. I urge students to learn new languages, like many Americans implore non-English speakers to learn English before coming to America.
The Life and Death of language

Crammed between two plastic armrests, I attempt to reposition myself to get comfortable on the US Airways jet that soars westward over the Atlantic. Luckily, I am seated in an aisle seat, which permits me a nice view of the entire passel of passengers. Nearly four hours into this transatlantic flight from Paris to Philadelphia, I am exhausted from the incessant movie-watching, textbook-reading, and music-listening entertainment. I have already gulped down three bottles of (French) Vittel water that I brought on the plane. The duration of my attention span is short compared to the time remaining on this flight.

My mind wanders with my eyes. I peer around the airplane observing the passengers. While staring intently in the United States is viewed as weird or creepy, gaping in France is a sign of interest. My eyes continue to penetrate the rest of the airplane passengers. Without thought, my interest lands upon a group of French passengers seated in the row directly in front of me. My senses become more acute. This will be one of the last opportunities for me to hear native French-speaking. I love how the words roll out of their mouths. I am finally comfortable, legs crossed in Indian-style, arms folded across my chest, very much like a judge or someone critiquing an event. I see and hear the following scenes.

Observation 1:

Flight attendant: Sir, is your TV screen not working?
French passenger: Quoi? Je suis Français. A questioning, confused look accompanies a stare over his reading glasses

Flight attendant: Speaking in a hurried voice to avoid further confrontation.

Oh, so you don’t speak English? Well, I’ll just give you a refund for you headphones since you weren’t able to use them.

The flight attendant walks away quickly, without the French passenger asking any questions or the flight attendant confirming if the passenger understands. My train of thought is interrupted as the flight attendant attends to another passenger and the pilot’s voice comes over the plane’s intercom. I watch the same French man and two French women to whom he begins to talk.

Observation 2:

Pilot: The boom of a native-English speaker’s voice, complete with southern accent, enters the cabin of the airplane. The twang in his voice is all-too familiar to someone who lived in the south, but never adapted to the accents.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this is yer captain speaking. Thank y’all, once again, fer selecting US Airways as yer transatlantic carrier. While this is springtime and the weather is beautiful, we are ‘bout to enter an area of high chop (Translation: turbulence). So, I’m goin’ to ask y’all to stay seated fer the next half-an-hour and fer the flight attendants to discontinue their services.

Click.

The three French-only speakers continue to chat about n’importe quoi (nothing). Enthralled in their conversation, the flight continues as usual for the French. My brain
and senses half-listened to the intercom and half-listened to their conversation, yet I still understood the directions and what action to take from the pilot’s words. The noise of the intercom did not interrupt French, as the English carried no meaning. The French speakers - two seated, one standing in the aisle:

Bien sur, c’était magnifique. Le Jardin des Sens est vraiment excellent. Presque le meilleur restaurant du monde.

Non! C’est pas possible. Il y a un petit bistro dans le quinzième qui mérite beaucoup plus que ton restaurant du sud!

The conversation continues, while everyone who understood what was just spouted over the plane’s intercom system fumbles to click their seatbelts. The French speakers do not know what was just said, nor do they seem to be bothered by the announcement. My attention begins to wane again. I start to fidget, tap the play button on my CD player, and let the blaring notes drown out anything around me. I sit alone on the airplane, oblivious to the rest of the passengers.

***

As the French passengers exhibit, you can hear the audible noises, perhaps as sounds or as words, but cannot imagine what is being told to you. So, you look around for clues: What does his face say? What movements does his body make? Your brain chugs along, scrapping together clues of what was said two seconds ago, while simultaneously being bludgeoned with more racket.

You immediately communicate in response. Your head tilts ten degrees to the right, your facial muscles squeeze your eyebrows upwards and together while you stare
back blankly. Emptiness. Noises of gestures fill the space. Anxiously, you either ask the speaker, “What did you just say?” or hope to God that something comprehensible will escape his mouth in the next second. You try to make meaning – a speech act – out of the person’s utterance.

From this vantage point, the speakers and the listeners have an opportunity for clarification and explanation. However, if someone speaks to you in a language alien to you, you might not have the ability to catch up or ask for meaning. Anxiety suddenly situates itself between the members of the communication. Like on the airplane, I did not respond with action. I responded by passively watching the situation, and then later ignored the dilemma. Perhaps I was scared or perhaps I did not care enough to help, or perhaps I did not think it was important to help. You might be at the mercy of the speaker and your responses could be harmful.

Not knowing what to say or do impacts lives. The argument for not understanding a language, initially, seems flimsy, especially for an American who is only surrounded by Americans, English-speakers. Americans who own the language of the world, right?

Traveling in lands of foreign languages can pose harmful responses due to language barriers. For instance, a Miami University student was murdered in Florence, Italy while traveling on spring break. Paul Levy and Matt McKinney of The Star Tribune, a Minnesota newspaper, published headlines announcing his murder, “John Petters: Wrong place, and no words to explain” (Levy). Petters and a friend, who was studying in Florence for the semester, wandered into a private rose garden, passing and
not understanding a sign posted in Italian stating that the garden was closed to the public. Nor did they comprehend the Italian urgings of a young Italian woman to stay off her private property. The woman then called her father out to handle the situation; “Raugei ordered the two to leave and grabbed Petters' friend by the arm. But the Americans didn't understand Italian, and Petters may have taken Raugei's actions as a threat” (Licari). No one could understand the attempted communications because there was no language link. Petters was stabbed to death and the father remains in an Italian prison charged for murder. The murder was a result of miscommunication and ignorance.

The urgency to understand what someone tells you bears more weight when you don’t understand what they are saying, as Petters’ death testifies. Imagine a time when someone has told you something, but you could not understand it because he mumbled, or spoke with an elevated vocabulary, or chatted too swiftly for your brain to process the words that jumped from his mouth. Even if the communication is in your native language, you probably experience uneasiness, anxiety, apprehension, frustration or paranoia. It is not until you hear something foreign that you seek to know its translation. The desire to only learn information at the moment that it is absolutely necessary is complacency.

Complacency brings about learning through necessity or reaction to a situation, not through enjoyment or increased knowledge for the future. Proactive learning occurs when you equip yourself with the tools necessary to handle possible situations you might encounter. For instance, students studying abroad should learn the spoken language of the country/region prior to living there in order to have a link with whom they will
communicate. The reflexive learning of languages coincides with Bennett’s ideas of ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism. I will examine how complacency, leading to passivity or inaction, leads to denial, then isolation. Ethnocentricity harbors such perceptions as complacency, denial and isolation. Denial is a conviction that no differences exist (Bennett 10). As language is a facet of culture, there is ignorance of the styles of communication between two different cultures. Remaining unaware of these differences breeds the idea that there is no need to learn the cultural difference of language.

Denial plays a role in language education. Not believing that differences exist outside of your native society harbors denial. Your education creates a large portion of your society. Thus, the lack of foreign language education can generate a void in your understanding of linguistic and cultural characteristics of diverse peoples, leading to denial. Foreign languages have not been a mainstay in the American educational system. If students are not taught that languages are important, they will not comprehend the importance of taking a language course, even if a school offers it. According to Mary Beth Marklein of USA Today, only 1.4 million students in U.S. colleges and universities took a foreign language class in 2002 (Markelein 9D).

Whittled down, 1.4 million foreign language students give little encouragement to the magnitude of Americans’ ability to fully understand the cultural differences of language. For many of the 1.4 million students, that one class might be a requirement for a major (other than a foreign language major). These current foreign language statistics
indicate the importance of addressing foreign language instruction in the US. Moreover, the low numbers could also indicate reasons for cultural perceptions and misconceptions.

Within the concept of denial of cultural language difference resides isolation. Isolation refers to the rejection of disparities because of physical barriers between a homogeneous population and heterogeneity (Bennett 10). If the diversity is not there, there is no need to believe it exists at all. If a suspicion of difference does exist, there is no need to pursue it further. Do not look for it! It will only create problems! Isolation creates the problems and misgivings between language barriers, not the disparities between the languages.

Separation from the whole dictates a myriad of examples of failure and collapse of individuals and countries. For instance, working as groups or teams is not just a business fad; it is a way of life in America. Conspiring together as a unit creates a diffusion of different ideas to create the optimal solution to a problem. For example, I have worked in many groups as a marketing major. Each business course has at least one group project. By participating in these group projects, I have discovered new ideas from my peers, not just from the professor.

We thrive upon differences to be powerful, yet we ignore the possibility to become even more knowledgeable and agile in the world by absconding from languages. America has become so in-tune to grinding along, self-sufficiently, until it seeks something more enticing, such as cheaper labor abroad. America waits until the last minute to move towards action. For instance, during his press conference in April 2004, President Bush stated several times, “…prior to 9/11 the country really wasn’t on war
footing” (Whitehouse). The president did not align the country for prevention (regardless of the type of attack). The country reacted. That is the way of American culture.

Americans expect other countries to work towards becoming part of the whole world as we define it. We attempt to help out, giving aid and assistance where we see fit. We try to encourage the common good. Why then, do Americans not proceed in a similar manner to becoming linguistically accepted into the world?

Perhaps because of the fear that arises when the US does not stand apart from the rest of the world. English, spoken around the world, but anchored in America stigmatizes the speaker. If you speak English with an American accent, you are asked questions about the decisions your president makes. You are held responsible for the actions of America. While studying and traveling abroad, Europeans would say to me: “American?” when they heard my less-than-authentic, French accent. It is difficult to disguise what is apparent, but it is easy to work towards integrating the desire to be less apparent. Incorporating heterogeneity decreases isolation. While language posits itself as the triumphant cultural symbol, the action towards acquiring multiple languages ushers students into multiple cultures and identities.

There might appear to be a contradiction between these ideas of adopting multiple ways of communication to adapt to linguistic/cultural differences. However, I urge everyone to develop multiple tools of communication. Languages are linguistic tools meant to assist you in the pursuit of development and experience. While languages can be used mercilessly to cache or hide what you say, the overall purpose of language is to communicate.
Complacency

The concept of complacency is one that I have applied to foreign language and culture from my personal experience and research. The frame-of-mind has not been formally cited as an action relating to language and culture studies. But to be complacent is to hesitate, wait and rely upon an unknown situation to occur prior to any action you take. You do not think about the possible impending situations. Rather, you fill your life with past or current thoughts, activities and ideas. Your thought processes do not attempt to address the possibility of a future situation. In a sense, complacency describes the cliché, “Ignorance is bliss.” In other words, the result of not knowing and being unprepared is pleasurable. Americans make the assumption that another member of another society will cater to their needs.

In response to passive behavior, individuals react to the situations they confront. Without the proper tools to address issues, such as language barriers, people respond with knee-jerk reactions. Often, these knee-jerk reactions arise from fear, ignorance, discomfort, or guilt. In the business world, if an American company wants to do business internationally, it has to prepare for the linguistic and cultural differences, which can enhance or hinder business. For instance, during negotiations, if a translator is the link between the two parties, the true intentions and desires may not come across clearly.

A power-struggle between people in a conversation arises when one communicator has an advantage over the other communicator. For example, if an
English-only speaking American vacations in Siena, Italy, a small Tuscan town, she will encounter people who only speak Italian. If the American expects Italians to cater to her needs, including the need to understand what is said, the cultural implications change. She abruptly changes from enjoying and experiencing a culture to placing demands upon a culture to conform to the American culture’s requirements. The American may become frustrated or hostile if her requests are not met.

Reactive behavior is the opposite of proactive behavior. Lars Larson, a business management scholar, describes the proactive behavior as “an active attitude toward goals and exert influence by ‘evoking images and expectations…establishing specific desires and objectives… [that] determine the direction a business takes’” (Larson 2). This black and white relationship between negative and positive behaviors arises often in the business world, yet is quite applicable to individuals’ attitudes toward the acquisition and use of foreign languages. The progression from complacency to passivity to reactive behavior brings to light issues, which highlight the American society’s refusal to learn new languages.

Passivity arises from the belief that an action is not necessary or reflects inherent values within a society. I define passive behavior as not acting. As Eugene Raudsepp, a business writer explains in his article, “Are you Properly Assertive?,” passive individuals lack a strong degree of assertiveness (2). Regarding non-English language attainment, individuals who are not assertive do not control their own ability to communicate. English speaking Americans encourage the situation to manage the subsequent actions. By learning at least basic language skills prior to entrance into another country,
Americans benefit. For instance, passive language behavior could disadvantage an
American in Kuwait, where Arabic is spoken. Without any knowledge of Arabic, a
prominent businessperson inquiring about a potential business venture in the oil industry
would rely upon a translator in order to do business. Moreover, the American foregoes
the favorable response of the Kuwaiti if he only spoke a few words of Arabic. While a
translator does provide the meanings of spoken words and sentences, he does not embody
the emotion and overall sense that one enjoys from a typical conversation. The translator
acts as a filter, limiting the communication between the business prospects.

As many individuals expect translators to solve their language barrier problems,
the urgency to obtain their own language skills is low. One leader who indoctrinated
homogeneity through harsh, degrading life-ending means did not believe in diminishing
language barriers. This man was Adolf Hitler, who thought only a few people needed to
learn other languages. In Hitler’s Mein Kampf (1925), he proclaims:

It is impossible to understand why millions of people…must learn two or
three foreign languages only a fraction of which they can make use of later
and hence most of them forget entirely; for a hundred thousand pupils who
learn French, for example, barely two thousand will have a serious use for
this knowledge later, while ninety-eight thousand…will not find
themselves in a position to make practical use of what they once learned.
They have…devoted thousands of hours to a subject which later is without
value and meaning for them…So in reality, because of the two thousand
people for whom the knowledge of this language is profitable, ninety-eight
thousand must be tormented for nothing and made to sacrifice valuable
time. (Quoted in Simon 11)

The study of languages as useless and time suppressing dictates a mindset that only
actions leading to a clear and directive future should persist. Such “tormenting” as Hitler
declares, reveals a naiveté about the benefits for second language acquisition. Learning a
foreign language diminishes passive cultural/linguistic behavior, while also increasing the
ability to process information and reason. The skills required to learn a language involve
those of critical analysis, comprehension, and application. The National Council of State
Supervisors of Foreign Language outlines several benefits from learning a foreign
language including “greater cognitive development, creativity and divergent thinking”
(“Rationales”). Additionally, knowing a foreign language has strategic implications for a
student today, as “four out of five new jobs in the United States are created as a result of
foreign trade” (“Rationales”). Personally, I have benefited from knowing French by
being offered an opportunity to intern abroad as a college graduate; an atypical job offer
for a fresh college graduate. I have made knowing a foreign language a necessity, and
now I am reaping the rewards.

Bernard Spolsky and Elana Shohamy explain the necessity of language policy in
their article, “Language Practice, Language Ideology, and Language Policy” (2000). As
language scholars, they advocate that, “Knowledge of a sacred language, for all its
symbolic importance, may also be seen as a method of providing access to knowledge or
information. It was perhaps out of this that arose the western tradition of providing
access, through a foreign language, to the culture and literature of prestige western
languages” (Spolsky 22, 23). Access to information or ideas provides very practical ramifications to the education of another language. For instance, according to the National Foreign Language Center, a linguistic research body, recent political and terrorist events have raised the need for people who speak Farsi (National Foreign Language Center). A lack of Farsi-speakers in the US for intelligence purposes created a disadvantage for a link in the US government. The complacent attitude toward promoting language education as a necessity or inevitability generated future problems, which continue to affect the United States.

Working to understand foreign languages will reward the student. It is an educational tool that can be applied to many disciplines. Having knowledge of a foreign language is like a code-breaker’s tools. If you can decipher a language, you have earned the right to understand it. Pro-active behavior leading to language skill attainment is a value to possess entering a field such as international business or international relations. During my international marketing class, I met Gerard Lopez, an international entrepreneur, who grew up in Luxembourg, but attended college at Miami University. He is fluent in seven languages, including French – a bit of an oddity by American standards. As a worldwide businessman, he interacts with people from many different countries on a regular basis. On one occasion, he was eating a meal with an executive from Microsoft Europe, who spoke French and English, and a handful of other English-speaking business people. The other business people present were only able to speak English, thus the meal conversation was in English. Lopez took advantage of his ability to communicate in French with the Microsoft executive, beginning a private
conversation, which no one else could understand. The two men decided to continue their conversation during a later appointment, without the other English-only speakers.

Gerard Lopez is able to speak seven languages because of the value he placed upon languages as he grew up. A society’s values are indications of what kind of significance language and culture correlate. One value index is the Hofstede Dimensions. Geert Hofstede, a professor, did a comprehensive study to determine how the values in a culture influence the workplace (Hofstede). The four dimensions Hofstede uses to compare and contrast societies include masculinity, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and individualism/collectivism. Power distance and uncertainty avoidance foreshadow the generalized American perception of the value of speaking foreign languages. Power distance is the separation of power between levels within an organization or a society. The United States has a low power distance, indicating that equality and opportunity for everyone is stressed. This is also a way of explaining the homogeneity of language in the United States. By striving to make language the same for everyone, people could be less likely to strive to learn the differences of another language/culture.

Another facet of Hofstede’s research, uncertainty avoidance, is a measure of how a culture tolerates ambiguity. The US ranks low for uncertainty avoidance, indicating that it “does not attempt to control all outcomes and results. It also has a greater level of tolerance for a variety of ideas, thoughts and beliefs” (Hofstede). The US level of uncertainty avoidance explains that Americans do accept a diversity of ideas. However, this could simply include those that are understandable, in English, and within the US.
Values a culture possesses affect its attitudes toward languages. Complacency, which could arise from a culture’s values, does not encourage education, which can lead to the lack of knowledge about a foreign language, or denial of other languages.
I hunch over a table at the back of a C2 class (France’s equivalent to first grade) in St. Laurent du Var, France. My 5’6” frame fits awkwardly on the bench made for *les enfants*. Megan, my American friend teaching English in France for a year, stands at the front of the classroom as the seven and eight-year-old French kids rummage around their desks, getting out their *cahiers* and pencil bags. I am on vacation in France, visiting Megan. They hurry to listen to Megan – an English-specialist to them, simply another American to me. With the greeting of, “Good morning class,” *les enfants* hold onto each word.

The boys eagerly perch on their seats with their feet under them and forearms hunched over their desks. The English specialist asks, “What is the weather like today?” Twenty little arms rocket into the air, with hands in a fist, except for their index fingers pointed straight up. All wave in the air, straining to be the lucky one to answer. Megan calls on Hervé, a small boy seated on the side of the classroom. With much satisfaction, he replies, “It is (h)ot.” The grin on his face testifies that he accepts the differences of language and culture with pleasure. Throughout the 45-minute English lesson enthusiastic responses continue. Even when the children give wrong answers, they have satisfaction in attempting the new language and culture. The ability to experience the difference is exciting.

As I sit and watch the youngsters clamor to answer Megan’s questions, I think back to my elementary education and my first experiences with a foreign language. I was
never introduced to another language until seventh grade, when my middle school began
a new program and I decided to take French because it “sounded cooler” than Spanish,
the other option. The age difference is something that I observed between the beginning
of my language education and that of the French students. The later exposure to foreign
language can affect how Americans perceive the necessity of a foreign language. The
absence of foreign languages in the early stages of the school system incites students’
denial of the existence of cultural differences.

Currently, a few K-12 school systems provide educational opportunities to learn a
foreign language to a degree of proficiency on a par with college language requirements
(NFLC). Eric Lenneberg, a linguist who forged ideas between language acquisition and
cognitive psychology, advises that the most advantageous time for a child to begin to
learn a foreign language is before the age of twelve. After this time, which is known as
the “Critical Period,” the child’s ability to learn a language becomes more limited
("Learning"). The separation between the availability of foreign language education and
what is necessary to learn a foreign language creates a dissonance. Stereotypes and
misconceptions of the use of non-English languages in the United States could more
likely to exist because children are not exposed to national differences, such as the
French children experience. Without the knowledge of foreign languages, children will
not seek out avenues like formal education. Bennett describes, “Even in the face of
seemingly obvious differences in human behavior associated with world affairs or
domestic multicultural issues, a person at this stage of development believes that cultural
diversity only occurs elsewhere” (10). Denial separates a society from the rest of the world through ignorance and lack of proactive behavior.

The purpose of language is to communicate and understand another individual or group of individuals. If Americans deny foreign language, they develop a passive technique to help them avoid conflict and challenges that could arise (Bennett). For example, the United States, a Western culture, promotes an openness to express opinions and manage conflict. Dean Tjosvold and Haifa F. Sun (2002), conflict management specialists, describe how conflict management changes with the differences between Western and Eastern cultures and individualistic and collectivist societies. Conflict management requires the ability to “deal with issues directly” (Tjosvold). Tjosvold and Sun’s studies show that Americans handle conflict management well. However, I argue that by denying the existence of different cultures in languages, which results from a lack of foreign language opportunities, the United States is not adept at conflict management. While we may be able to manage conflict in a political or a business perspective, wherein we are able to maintain free speech, the lack of learning foreign languages for use in other countries exemplifies weak conflict management skills. America is capable of managing conflict within its own realm, but when Americans enter other cultures, they are deficient in dealing with differences. Americans provoke the conflict by demanding English everywhere, yet do not recognize or deny that a problem exists. Thus, many Americans believe that English is the official language of business.

However, I believe that a problem does exist and a solution needs to be established. It should be noted that United Nations, an international governing body,
maintains six official languages, Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish (UN). Similarly, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) uses English and French. As such people who desire to work for NATO must be fluent in either English or French and have a working knowledge of the other language (NATO). While English is a useful language domestically and abroad, it is not the ultimate solution to all conflicts. When disputes arise, the parties involved must be willing to use behavioral strategies to solve the problem. Denying the existence of differences or problems does not encourage action.

* * *

Denial defined with regard to language and culture is an act of rejection. In a sense, rejecting other cultures and languages then discards the heritage that precedes us. I am not preaching to educators that different cultures are not taught within the school. Rather, I am arguing that the combination of foreign languages and their cultures do not invade an American’s education to the necessary degree. E.D. Hirsch, an educational reform and cultural literacy scholar, expresses his thoughts about knowledge and literacy in his article, “Literacy and Cultural Literacy” (1988). While I recognize that Hirsch’s beliefs are prescriptive and conservative, and I do not promote his ideologies as a whole, I find some aspects of his arguments applicable to my thesis. Cultural literacy is “the network of information that all competent readers possess” (Reader 39). By applying his text to the importance of foreign languages in America, one sees how the lack of foreign languages denies knowledge.
Hirsch writes, “The complex undertakings of modern life depend on the cooperation of many people with different specialties in different places. Where communications fail, so do the undertakings” (39). Advocating the necessary interconnectedness to acquire knowledge, Hirsch promotes the need to investigate all cultures to gain wisdom. By borrowing from cultures, we use language. Thus, we need other languages to learn. Denying outside languages or cultures reduces our ability to learn.

To illustrate this theme, imagine the staleness of life if you lived on a deserted island with only two other people. The same, monotonous conversations could occur. Limits on conversation would be directed by the amount of knowledge the three of you possess collectively. You would be bound to the constraints of yourselves. Now, place yourself in a sprawling metropolis, where millions of people exchange ideas every moment of the day. By the time the land sinks past the sun, you could possibly come into contact with thousands of ideas from different people you do not even know. With linguistic and cultural differences present, you increase your knowledge capacity.

Although you might deny yourself the ability to speak another language, the opportunity persists to encounter culture and language. Taking pro-active measures reduces personal denial. Hirsch describes the omnipresence of literate culture as an undying attribute of our society that automatically decreases denial:

Literate culture is the most democratic culture in our land: it excludes nobody; it cuts across generations and social groups and classes; it is not usually one’s first culture, but it should be everyone’s second, existing as
it does beyond the narrow spheres of family, neighborhood, and region.

(Reader 47)

It is impossible to evade the relations in society and be knowledgeable. There is a level of subsistence, which relies upon other cultures acquired through language.
Isolation

Miami University is a top-rated public university in the United States. Over the four years of my Miami experience, I have enjoyed a semester away from this institution to study at L’Université Paul-Valéry in Montpellier, France. During my five months in France, I lived the French lifestyle and spoke French everyday. In France, I also encountered a way of life at college that was completely opposite to the way of life at Miami. There were no sororities. Extra-curricular activities were not resume builders. French students approached college differently than American students. The first year of college in France is not a time for freedom and rebellion, but rather it is a time to prove yourself.

When I returned to Miami in the fall of 2003, many of my friends and classmates asked me about my experience. The most intriguing reaction I received from some students was shock. Gasp! “How could you leave Miami for an entire semester? I could never leave my friends and all of the fun here in Oxford!” Now, I realize that not everyone has the same aspirations as I do. Not everyone enjoys traveling, and certainly, not everyone has an interest in speaking a foreign language in order to communicate. However, if the rationale for choosing not to study abroad and explore a new country is a fear of missing out on what is happening at Miami for four months, then these students are in a very sad state. These xenophobic students isolate themselves within the homogeneous population of Miami, fearing a life outside of the confines of Oxford.
Luckily, the Miami population boasts a much stronger coalition of students who study abroad. According to the Institute of International Education, an organization that promotes the research and development of study abroad, Miami University ranks number one for doctoral institutions who send students abroad. During the 2001-2002 academic school year, 1,160 Miami students explored universities around the world. The 1,160 students took action towards encountering languages and cultures, bypassing complacency and denial. A portion of the remaining Miami students (not including financial reasons) continued the isolation that pervades Miami, a microcosm of the United States.

Isolation is an act of separation from the whole. I define isolation as consciously removing yourself or your culture from interacting with a greater system of cultures. For example, an American who has lived in the same town his entire life and deliberately purchases items made in America, such as a Ford pickup truck, is one form of an isolationist. Americans are encouraged to be isolationists geographically, politically and through media. Through these three examples, the isolation and separation of Americans from other languages aggrandizes.

Edward Sapir, an anthropologist and general linguist theorist, contributed to the study of culture theory and cultural psychology. Sapir notes:

Language is a great force of socialization, probably the greatest that exists.

By this is meant not merely the obvious fact that significant social intercourse is hardly possible without language but that the mere fact of a
common speech serves as a peculiarly potent symbol of the social
solidarity of those who speak the language. (Meyer 111)
Sapir advocates language as a cultural unifier. This solidarity within one culture can also
welcome a person from another culture. For example, if an American travels to China,
but does not speak Chinese, it would be very challenging to fully interact with and
appreciate the Chinese culture. Conversely, if an American travels to China and knows
how to speak Chinese, the likelihood of entering the culture would increase. Even a very
limited knowledge of Chinese, such as courtesy words and the ability to ask for directions
would greatly enhance the Americans travel to China. Regarding the English language as
a link that will always work to communicate is a fallacy that incubates isolation.

The purest form of Americans’ isolation from other cultures and languages is the
geographic division between the landmasses. The English Speaking Union, an
organization that promotes education and understanding through the English language,
notes that the largest concentration of speakers of English as a first language is in
America (226 million) and the United Kingdom (56 million) (ESU). Americans’ nearest
opportunity to encounter another language is Canada’s sparse population of French-
speakers or Mexico’s Spanish population. As the likelihood of using a foreign language
on a daily basis is small due to the separation of the US from countries that do not speak
English, Americans might not see the use or the value of learning another language.

The 2003 film, Lost in Translation is a social commentary on the fear and
reactions two Americans face while visiting Japan and not knowing how to communicate
with the Japanese. The film’s stars, Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson, play Bob, an
American actor, and Charlotte, a 25-year-old wife of a photographer, who meet at their hotel in Tokyo. The duo attract each other for several reasons, including their similarities: both American, both English speaking, both feel lost. During one of their first meetings in the hotel bar/lounge, Bob sips on hard liquor as Charlotte approaches him and they begin to talk:

**Bob:** Can you keep a secret? I’m trying to organize a prison break. We have to first get out of the bar, then the hotel, then the city, and then the country. Are you in or out?

**Charlotte:** I’m in.

Bob and Charlotte have created more isolation within Tokyo by viewing the experience as prison-time, forced isolation. Their initial inability to understand the language or the culture obliged them into further isolation.

Media continues to isolate Americans’ understanding of cultures and languages. As a major outlet of information, media sources have the potential to greatly influence what one thinks and understands. Because popular television shows do not expand their storylines past a specific American society – due to the public’s interests and demands – misconceptions of other languages and cultures may arise. For instance, my family hosted a French exchange student, Guillaume, for three months while I was in sixth grade. I ignorantly asked Guillaume if they (the French) had microwaves in France. Of course they did! I had isolated myself and my culture from reality.

Political figures can make louder statements than media about the status of American isolationism. The President of the United States stands as a figurehead of a
country separated from the rest of the world. The system of governance in America has the ability to measure all Americans by the standard of the President we elect. In July of 2001, just six months after his inauguration, President Bush dramatically adjusted international relations from the preceding Bill Clinton Administration. In a New York Times article, Thom Shanker explains the environment of the Bush Administration’s actions: “The reaction from Berlin to Beijing has been one of concern that an American president who walks away from so many treaties might be one who wants to walk away from the world – or, at the least, one who will demand that the world live by terms dictated by America alone” (Times A1). At this moment, the world began to see the magnified isolation our President encouraged through his policy changes.

Shanker’s article included a rebuttal from the Bush party: “In general, Mr. Bush and his most senior advisers say they are applying what they see as a hard-headed assessment of treaties case by case, and based on America’s interests” (Times A1). What President Bush misunderstood was that America could not function alone. The United States of America is one gear that rotates within a total system of economies and governments of the total world population. The teeth of our gears – our policies, actions and attitudes – can either function with the other gears or spin in circles, alone, creating no changes or mutations in the world. I believe that America’s policies must serve the American population. Yet, the means by which President Bush addressed his policies during the first six months of his term as American President devoured the possibility of evading isolationism.
Isolationism provokes ignorance, just as complacency and denial do. Incorporating foreign languages and cultures into education and habitual knowledge could decrease the negative tendency toward isolationism. Isolation is a depressing stigma. No one wants to be the loner or the shunned. Yet, America is a loner. English-only ideologies – the belief that everyone should know English throughout the world – create isolation.
Conclusion – Implications for the future

Communication is a link that unites people of different cultures together. Americans may have different habits and beliefs, but communication is the ability to explain and discuss these practices and lifestyles. People can learn a language, which will allow them to further understand a culture. However, in the United States, students must overcome the inherent challenges of complacency, denial and isolation. These three characteristics exist because no one has aggressively challenged them or changed the paradigm. By subverting the dominion of ignorance, students can propel themselves to a higher level of understanding.

The future of languages depends upon the students who do take the challenge of learning a foreign language. In order to engage in this educational process, the availability of foreign languages in elementary schools must increase. If students become exposed to languages earlier, it could increase their interest in foreign languages in later years. The prevalence of complacency can decline from these actions. Also, teachers should treat foreign languages as a regular academic class, placing the same emphasis on it as other subjects, such as math and reading. Instead of offering foreign languages as an elective, make it a requirement, regardless of a student’s current plans for the future (vocational or college tracks). If all teachers emphasize that students will use foreign languages someday, perhaps the attitude towards the subject will be altered. The educational process is the key to changing foreign language attitudes. Children know that
school is for learning. If the outlet for foreign languages exists, the reasons for not
learning a foreign language should decline.

For the generations of Americans preceding current students, they must encourage
the study of foreign languages. If a businessperson travels abroad, she should learn the
basic greetings and key phrases – Hello! Thank you! Where is the hotel? How much
does it cost? Albeit, the pronunciation will not be perfect, and the American could
stumble on the words, but the attempt and the interest will be demonstrated. People in
foreign countries will appreciate the attempt to speak their languages. Taking the time to
learn a few words of a foreign language is an excellent way of improving the language
barriers between English and other languages.

Learning Spanish in elementary school and memorizing key phrases in Chinese
might seem like insignificant actions to change current behaviors with regards to foreign
languages. But, these actions could manipulate the attitudes of those in the generations to
follow. You cannot change people’s attitudes, but you can influence their behavior.
Increasing foreign language knowledge will be a process, a strategic plan for the United
States. In the business world, for instance, the idea of globalization is prominent today,
yet the tools to communicate first-hand with someone from Egypt in Arabic are very
limited from a lack of language education. America may seem like one of the most
modern societies in the world, but in fact it has not even addressed its citizens’ abilities to
correspond in other countries without using English. It is as if we have not encountered
the Internet and are still functioning with the technologies of the 1960s. We have to
strengthen our communication skills and move forward.
As Americans insist on speaking English worldwide, we continue to disrespect the multitude of different cultures. The first measure to alleviate this disrespect must be to alleviate the complacency towards the different languages around the world. By actively understanding the diversity of languages, it also decreases denial and isolation. We cannot change the location of our country. We can change the policies and actions of the government, a people’s government, and in our business interactions.

English is a common thread that can lead to understanding, as many people learn English. Yet, we should also act in manner that would show respect for interacting with another culture – speaking in another language in another country – speaking Japanese in Japan. Speaking English in Japan is like putting regular unleaded gas in a car that needs premium gasoline. While the car might run momentarily, it will eventually have problems and need premium gasoline. Yes, a businessperson might encounter English-speakers in Japan, but she is in Japan. Speak Japanese.

Linguistics is the link that connects people. While on the metro and train in Paris and Chicago, respectively, I could hear the foreign languages and understand what was said. Two different countries, at least two different languages. The freedom I experienced by knowing the languages alleviated any anxieties I might have encountered from not knowing what was said. Freedom of speech in the United States is typically interpreted as the ability to say what you believe and feel. My idea of freedom of speech is being able to express what you think, but also absorb what you hear. Since communication involves speaking and listening, you must have the freedom to do both.
Bibliography


Marklein, Mary Beth. “Students taking strides in foreign languages.” USA Today. 6 Nov 2003: 9D.


