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Opinion

By Mary Louise Pratt

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In the panicked days following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, an announcement was heard on radio stations across the country. Speakers of Arabic were urgently needed, and people with expertise in the language were asked to call an 800 number set up by the FBI.

Thousands did. But when FBI language personnel began screening the volunteers, they met disappointment. Only a few had the range and level of expertise in both English and Arabic that were needed - - so few that the whole effort was not worthwhile.

So began a wake-up call about language that in the two years since has become steadily louder, clearer and more urgent. No sooner was Afghanistan targeted as the site of the problem than surveys revealed the gaping hole in United States foreign policy: not a single person at an American institution of higher education was studying Pashto, the key language of the region.

The American presence in Iraq continues to bring language into the news every few days. Suddenly, linguistic and cultural knowledge and skills, or the lack of them, are decisive factors in determining the course of geopolitical affairs. International English is no longer enough: if enemies don't want to be understood, they won't use it; populations whose support we seek don't know it.

Can the United States' century-long love affair with monolingualism be coming to an end? The 8,000 language and literary scholars who are gathering this week in San Diego for the Modern Language Association's annual convention certainly hope so. We devote our lives to promoting the significance and value of language and language learning.

According to the MLA's report, "Foreign Language Enrollments in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2002," more college students are studying foreign languages than ever before, and they are studying a greater variety of languages. Vast new government resources are available for developing language expertise.

All this sounds wonderful, but there's a serious problem. Like so much public investment since Sept. 11, 2001, new initiatives for studying languages may be too tightly focused on a powerful but reactive national security agenda. This means developing strategies for dealing with enemies, like surveillance, espionage, interrogation, military communication. It means classified research, military training programs and the cultivation of a dozen identified strategic languages.

Of course, all these things might be necessary, but it would be tragic if they became the center of gravity for our national investment in language. Why? Three reasons stand out.

First, the country's language needs go far beyond defense and security. Within America's borders there is a need, for example, for professionals and service people of all kinds to operate in locally spoken languages. In our interactions abroad, we need area experts, diplomats, scholars, negotiators, aid workers, business people and public servants to create and maintain relations with other societies, whether or not they are considered strategic or critical at the moment.

Second, when it comes to language, a security agenda cannot on its own produce what it aspires to produce, that is, security. By the time a language has become a national security imperative, it is already too late: speakers of that language have already been defined as enemies. Failures of communication and understanding already have done their damage.

Which brings up the third reason, one that security agencies grapple with directly: achieving advanced competence in another language and culture can make you a security risk. Acquiring such competence usually means having sustained, meaningful relations with speakers of the language, living among them and participating in their communities.

The arrests of two interpreters and a Muslim chaplain at the U.S. high-security prison at Guantanamo provide a recent example. All three were suspected of collaborating with prisoners. If the charges are true, they show the difficulty of maintaining relations of enmity while engaging in intense human communication. If they are false, they show the suspect status of the bilingual, bicultural agent in a situation of warfare.

At bottom, this is a contradiction between the social and communicative powers of language and the rupture of human relations that is warfare. We should not build a national language investment on that contradiction. The real role language has to play in the security and well-being of the nation is developing and sustaining the vast spectra of personal, institutional, commercial, diplomatic and intellectual relations that prevent conflicts from turning into crises in the first place.

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