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on

CERTAIN DEVELOPMENTS IN THE STUDY OF THE ORIENT *Language + Area Studies*

in the United States

during the War

by

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It is customary to begin a memorandum of this kind with the statement that the incidence of war accentuated currents already under way rather than started new ones. In the matter of the development of American interest and participation in the study of the Orient and the hitherto remoter areas of the world the assertion is at best only partially true. A more accurate statement would be that in this field as in so many others the war presented an opportunity for operation and experiment on a scale so large in comparison with anything possible in peace times as to constitute almost a difference in kind rather than one in degree.

It will be convenient to discuss developments in the United States in this war decade, not in terms of a break-down according to the respective civilizations concerned, - Russian, Chinese, Malay, Burmese, etc. - but around two more general categories, that is to say, language studies and the integrated study of the respective civilizations which came to be known as area-studies. The former developed from the need for imparting practical language competence to large bodies of men about to be employed in the more remote corners of the world. For teaching most of the languages needed, American facilities were either non-existent or quite inadequate. The latter arose from the attempt to focus all the disciplinary studies, including language, upon a culture-area with a view to presenting a reasonably complete picture of the civilization concerned, also for the benefit of troops destined to operate in the areas in question. The two aspects are of course logically closely related, and were in practice frequently treated together.

The period immediately prior to the war had seen a modest but still very real growth of interest in civilizations outside of the American and West European orbit. This was most commonly actualized by the presentation of courses in American universities and colleges, - courses relating to Far Eastern and Russian civilizations primarily. Any enumeration of such courses in 1940 would have shown an increase over those in 1935, just as 1935 would have shown a similar increase over 1930; a gradual expansion of this kind was under way. Unfortunately, this development was very one-sided; it was practically entirely at the philological and historical level, and it concerned only China,

Japan, and Russia. The social sciences, - economics, political science, etc., - were virtually unrepresented, *and there was no* ~~as was also~~ serious consideration of India, Southeast Asia, Africa, etc. In the study of languages, emphasis was placed upon the acquisition of a reading competence, and even that was further directed towards concern with the philological and literary monuments, rather than towards general practical use. ✓

Prosecution of the war demanded troops and supplementary personnel who could speak Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Burmese, Malay, Annamese, and twenty other tongues, together with those usually taught in American universities and colleges. Obviously, the prior development sketched above afforded only very slight preparation for the task which this need posed. Many of the languages named were not included within the development, indeed had never been taught in the United States; the competence demanded was different from that aimed at by university teaching, in that emphasis had to be placed upon speaking and understanding rather than upon reading and writing. Teaching materials directed to this end were practically unknown. Finally, the demand for people with even modest command of these languages was so great that almost everybody who had participated in university work, either as student or as teacher was immediately taken out of academic life and brought into the war effort, with the result that just those who might have been expected to supply the teaching became unavailable for the purpose.

In this state of affairs recourse was had to the technical linguists, or linguistic scientists as they prefer to call themselves. Their field of study was well represented and active in the United States; it had grown upon the study of the native American Indian languages. Just prior to the war, ² experiments had been undertaken in applying their descriptive and analytic techniques to the problems in the teaching of languages. The technical linguist works directly with native speakers of the language which he is analysing, and bases his analysis directly upon their speech. It seemed reasonable to suppose that part of this process might be formalized and directed towards the teaching operation. The resultant teaching method consisted of dividing the operation into its two component parts: confiding the analytic and descriptive presentation of the language to the technical linguist and the necessary incessant drill-work to the

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native speaker. With this division of function, the linguist and director of the instruction did not need to be, though of course he quite frequently was, himself a speaker fluent manipulator of the language, and on the other hand the native drill-master (variously called informant, guide, tutor, etc.) did not need to be a trained scholar, indeed in general the more linguistically naive he was, the better, provided only that he spoke with native fluency an accepted dialect of the speech in question.

It is not to be contended, of course, that the organization of language instruction in this way is completely new, nevertheless there were so many unsolved problems connected with the various elements that past experience ^{furnished} left little to build upon. Moreover, no language teaching materials had ever been devised with this type of instruction in view. The preparation of new materials simultaneously with the presentation of instruction by this different method provided, consequently, an approach to language study that was essentially a novelty, at least in the United States.

But when the full strength of the war demands, calling for instruction in these unusual languages for ten or twelve thousand men, struck the universities and colleges, trained technical linguists were not available in sufficient number to meet the need, even though it had already been demonstrated that one such linguist to as many as twenty native drill-masters was a practicable ratio. Consequently, only a very small part of the language instruction carried on during the war has been a real exemplification of the linguist-informant method operating under ideal conditions; at the best it has been only a series of more or less close approximations to that method. Nevertheless, this instruction has in general involved three factors of importance:

- 1) concentrated use of time, usually in the order of fifteen or twenty hours of classroom work per week; 2) emphasis upon the spoken language with the acquisition of reading competence, though not entirely neglected, occupying definitely second-place; 3) much drill by and with native speakers of the language. In general the results, in spite of the facts that there were no materials and that the ideal situation above described was infrequent, were satisfactory to good, in some cases startlingly so.

Naturally, the spectacle of large numbers of ordinary American youth learning these most ^{unaccustomed} outlandish tongues provoked much editorial comment, too much of it describing the experiment as the development of a marvelous new method which took all the difficulty out of language learning. ⁴ While nobody in any responsible position countenances any such claims, the fact is that the experience has already led to considerable change in the thinking about language teaching, even for the languages usually taught, in American universities and colleges, and there is every likelihood that the linguist-informant technique has come to stay. ⁵

Meanwhile, materials for language instruction in accordance with this technique were gradually being produced. The form in which these at present exist is a series of elementary text-books in about thirty languages with accompanying ^{phonographic} gramophone records. The text-book is divided into thirty learning-units designed to cover about the first two hundred hours of class-room work. ⁶ With the first twelve of these units there are twenty-four double faced discs recording all the foreign language material in the units. The combination is designed for use at the lowest level of language learning, that is to say, for the individual student studying by himself, but it is most frequently used in the class-room situation with a native drill-master or guide present. These materials, both text-books and records, are now being released by the Armed Forces for public distribution, and will consequently soon be available to any who wish to purchase them. ⁷

The present time, then, finds the American academic ^{institutions} structure better off than ~~it has ever been~~ before in the matter of facilities for teaching the East European, African, and Asiatic Languages. Numerous highly trained technical linguists have made themselves specialists in languages like Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Burmese, Malay, Swahili, Hausa, Fanti, etc. Elementary text-books and supplementary materials have been prepared and are at hand in convenient form. There has been very considerable experience in the utilization of the relatively untrained native-speaker in the teaching process. It is worth remarking that, as will be seen from what is written above,

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this is in general a completely new creation, only in very minor measure dependent upon the pre-war development of philological studies in the universities and colleges.

One of the differences between language study in the peace time world and language study for war was that in the latter case language was not studied in a vacuum. In the normal pattern of war-time study, half of the student's time was taken in the acquisition of the language and the other half was devoted to what came to be known as area studies,⁸ that is the focussing of all pertinent knowledge from the various disciplines, - economics, geography, history, politics, religion and philosophy, etc., - upon the area with a view to providing an integrated picture of the civilization in question. Again, this was not, of course, an entirely new concept; the pursuit of university degrees through concentration upon the civilization of a region like the Far East or Latin-America had not been by any means unknown in American universities and colleges. But the scale upon which instruction had to be offered and the inadequate supply of teachers - for in this field as in languages one of the first results of the outbreak of war was the absorption of most people who knew anything about foreign areas directly into the war effort - led to the development of new techniques and new materials. And similarly to the language program, this development too owes little to any previous pattern of normal times. Personnel had to be created, or rather, means had to be found of utilizing in teaching personnel with no experience and insufficient training. Implements and materials had to be created almost from the beginning. Some of the techniques devised owe much to the anthropologist, to whom the concept of areal integration and study of a society as a whole was not new. In particular, much success was had with modifications of the anthropologists' interview technique, in which planned questioning of natives or others who knew the region in question replaced the formal lecture. On the whole, results were surprisingly good, when one considers the handicaps under which instruction was presented, handicaps which were only partially compensated by enthusiasm and realization that participation in the war was serious business.⁹

Area studies, too, seem to have come to stay. While there is, of course, the

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danger that they will become a rather trivial fad, in general it is to be hoped that the wartime necessity has developed something of lasting value in the educational process.

Certainly, means must be found by which the student who is to live in the spherical ~~of diminished time-distances of~~ world of the second half of the twentieth century can meet civilizations other than his own as a normal part of his educational experience. The area-studies integration seems to meet this need. Experimentation is proceeding at several levels:

1. The Fundamental Area Course, organized to take about a quarter of the student's time for the year, or its equivalent. This meets the needs of the student who wishes to make the acquaintance of Russia, China, India, or the Arabic world as a normal part of his education and not with any intention of making vocational use of this acquaintance.
2. The Vocational Minor, designed to take about half of a student's time for a year and to be the introduction for the student who proposes to make vocational use of his knowledge of the civilization in question. This, of course, would include language studies.
3. The Major or Area Concentration, in which the student plans his education around the area concept, just as he would normally plan it around economics, philosophy, or chemistry. It would take about a third of his four years in college.
4. Advanced Study and Research, which, however, should be rather on a disciplinary than an areal basis.

By and large, the wartime experience was at the second of these four levels, the vocational minor, and this is a level at which experiment was exceedingly necessary for academic purposes. Greater development, of course, is in large measure dependent on progress at the fourth level, from which adequate implementation will come.

This brief sketch exhibits the main lines of wartime attack on the study of the languages and civilizations of regions not normally covered in American universities and colleges. To a considerable extent these areas lay in the Orient, so that the sketch also presents in a certain way a development in Oriental studies. ~~It looks like an important development in Oriental studies.~~ It looks like an important development in the newer education, the more so because it involves considerable departure from the traditions of earlier Oriental studies. This is not to say that the older type of philological antiquarian scholarship is now a thing of the past; rather will

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it be strengthened and vivified by the expansion of its base into a wider and more awakened scientific interest in the civilizations of the East.