The Politics and Sociolinguistics of Foreign Language Advocacy In a South Texas University

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Every student of sociolinguistics would likely agree with Murray Edelman's statement that language is always an intrinsic part of some particular social situation; it is never an independent instrument or simply a tool for description. This is another way of saying that language consists of referential and condensation symbols. Edelman, citing Sapir, writes that "every symbol stands for something other than itself".[1]

Referential symbols are :

> **economical ways of referring to the objective elements in objects or situations: the elements identified in the same way by different people. Such symbols are useful because they help in logical thinking about the situation and in manipulating it. Industrial accident statistics . . . are referential . . . symbols, although they may also be condensation symbols (ibid.).**

Condensation symbols, on the other hand:

> **evoke the emotions associated with the situation. They condense into one symbolic event, sign, or act patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations, promises of future greatness (ibid.).**

The present paper is about the embedded language and politics of foreign language advocacy in a South Texas university. It is about language in several senses. First, the paper uses language to advocate teaching foreign languages. In this sense, it employs referential symbols. Second, the paper has to do with language communities, groups of people in the region who speak English, Spanish or Tex-Mex, as the local Spanish dialect/code is called. These languages/dialects are condensation symbols, which is to say that they evoke

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[1] **The Symbolic Uses of Politics (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 6.**

emotional responses in people. Third, it has to do with which language forms, or paradigms, are acceptable to justify arguments for changes in university policies. Fourth, the English phrases and terminology used by this U.S., Anglo (white) academic may themselves be condensation symbols for some readers. To the extent this is the case, they will evoke emotional responses unrelated to the content of the piece, understood in terms of referential symbols.

A Modest Proposal

The writer, a political science professor who teaches Mexican and Latin American Politics, has proposed that every undergraduate student at his university, Texas A&M-Kingsville (TAMUK), be required to demonstrate foreign language competence at the two-year college level as a requirement for graduation. This could be done by means of a proficiency exam or by having taken and passed two years of course work. The idea has prospered to the extent that it is included as a possibility in a long-term plan for the university entitled Top Ten by 2010.[2] The objective of the plan is that TAMUK be widely recognized as being among the top ten state universities in Texas by the year 2010. Our interest here is primarily in the differential responses to the proposal by individuals, groups, and organizational subunits of the university.

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[2] **"Explore implementation of a foreign language competency requirement for all students that could be satisfied by traditional credit courses, an international internship, or pre-existing knowledge of a second language." P. 10. The report was presented by Task Force Chairman Charles DeYoung in December 2000.**

My overall argument is first, that a successful proposal must be framed in a manner that is congruent with the linguistic/symbolic frameworks of people and groups within and without the university who control and influence decision making. This is a complicated matter, since Anglo, English-speakers dominate Texas A&M-Kingsville and Anglo elites are still powerful locally. However, most TAMUK students are Mexican-Americans (although only about half speak Spanish) and Mexican-Americans now dominate the politics and government of the city and region. Second, a successful proposal must not threaten the established interests of departments and colleges in the university and it must promise benefits perceived as being significant to the university as a whole, to the students, and to the region.

The Context

The politics of trying to get a foreign language competency proposal accepted is particularly interesting because of its relationship to language and language communities. As Clare Mar-Molinero points out, language is not simply about communication. Language forms are also symbols of identity.[3] They are condensation symbols which reflect who people think they are and who they want to be. It is very tricky to advocate the use of new condensation symbols because they have different connotations for different groups in a multi-ethnic society such as that of South Texas. Consequently, for the foreign language

[3] **The Politics of Language in the Spanish-Speaking World (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 114.**

competency proposal to be successful, it must--at a minimum--be closely attuned to the local setting: to the Mexican-American and Anglo communities and to the organizational structure and staffing of Texas A&M University-Kingsville.

TAMUK is located in a small city of approximately 26,000 people some 40 miles south of Corpus Christi, Texas. One can reach the Mexican border from Kingsville by car in two hours--driving south to McAllen or west to Laredo The citizens of Kingsville are predominantly Mexican-American. The most important local institutions are the King Ranch and related institutions, the Naval Air Station, Hoerst-Celenese (a large chemical plant in nearby Bishop), TAMUK, and a variety of smaller businesses/ranches/churches, etc. Although the city was long dominated by "Anglo" elites, politics is now dominated by Mexican-Americans. Economic elites are still largely Anglo.[4]

TAMUK is a small, full-service university with 6,150 students (FTE's', Fall, 2001). Sixty-two percent of the students are Hispanic (overwhelmingly Mexican-Americans). According to a recent survey, 60% of the students say that they can carry on a "fairly simple conversation" in Spanish.[5] Most of the Mexican-Americans who do not speak Spanish or Tex-Mex have had some exposure to the language. On the other hand, the great majority of the faculty are not Mexican-Americans and do not speak Spanish. A few faculty speak other foreign languages.

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[4]In South Texas, the term "Anglo" refers to a person who is not Hispanic, Black, or Asian. To outsiders, it seems curious that Irish, Poles, Russians, and Germans are equally "Anglo."

The university consists primarily of six Colleges: Arts & Sciences, Engineering, Education, Business, Agriculture, and the Graduate Studies. There is no independent Foreign Language Department. Faculty who teach Spanish and French--the only foreign languages currently imparted--are part of the Department of Language and Literature in the College of Arts & Sciences (A&S), a department dominated by English professors. Students in Bachelor of Arts programs (B.A.) in A&S are currently required to take two years of foreign language. Those in Bachelor of Science programs (B.S.) do not have a foreign language requirement. Individual departments may impose their own foreign language requirements, although only a few have done so. International Business requires one year of foreign language and Bilingual Education requires an oral competency exam.

The Mexican-American Language Community in Kingsville/TAMUK

Joshua Fishman writes that "language itself is content, a referent for loyalties and animosities."[6] This was brought home to the writer recently in a conversation with an elderly Mexican-American woman in our city--someone

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[5] **57.5% of the students claimed to be able to read a letter in Spanish. Survey conducted by Richard Hartwig and Mark Walsh of 271 students in the universally required American Government and Texas Politics & Government classes (13 sections) in December, 2001.**

[6] **The Sociology of Language (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1972), p. 4.**

unrelated to the university. I will call her Maria.[7] People in Kingsville, as elsewhere in the United States, are concerned about the possibility of terrorist attacks in the aftermath of the events of September 11th, 2001. The TAMUK engineering programs–especially natural gas–have attracted a number of students from the Middle East. These folks are in an uncomfortable position now, since the terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were all from the Middle East. Maria told me that she had been shopping one day in HEB, the local grocery store, when she heard Arab-looking people speaking their language. She went up to them and asked, "Do you speak English?" When they replied in the affirmative, Maria said: "Then speak English! This is America!" The irony, of course, is that it would never have occurred to Maria to tell Mexican-Americans not to speak Spanish in HEB because "This is America." For Maria, Tex-Mex is not a foreign language--perhaps in part because it is consists of Spanish mixed with English. And it is certainly not un-American. Maria has never been to Mexico and does not want to go there. To her, it is a scary, dirty place. She is definitely not a "Mexican."

For many Anglos in South Texas, however, Spanish or Tex-Mex <u>is</u> a foreign language. People who speak Spanish/Tex-Mex are often referred to as "Mexicans." Newspaper accounts indicate that Anglos in hospitals are often uncomfortable when their nurses speak to each other in Spanish. Patients are in vulnerable situations and apparently imagine that the nurses are ignoring their

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[7]The accents in "María," "José" and other Spanish names are often--although not always--dropped in South Texas.

problems, making fun of them, or whatever. In any case, the Anglo patients resent not being able to understand the nurses' conversations in Spanish. Sometimes the tension has an economic base. As far north as Corpus Christi, a woman complained of the unfairness of not being able to get a good job because she is white and cannot speak Spanish.[8] On the other hand, many older Mexican-Americans remember having been punished for speaking Spanish in school when they were young.

I moved from Monterrey, Mexico to teach in Kingsville in the Fall of 1993. I wanted to keep up my Spanish, so I would often ask Mexican-American students who came to my office if they spoke Spanish. If so, could we talk about whatever their problem was in that language? To my surprise, a number of the students who clearly did speak Spanish did not want to talk to me in Spanish. I have not investigated the matter systematically, but it may be useful to report my impressions. First, many students said they were reluctant to speak Spanish because they didn't want to make mistakes. They didn't speak the language that well. . . They were also conscious of speaking Tex-Mex rather than standard Spanish. They considered standard Mexican, Latin American, or peninsular Spanish to be correct and Tex-Mex variations to be wrong. I was a professor, had just lived in Monterrey for three years, and my Spanish was more "standard" than theirs. I was also an Anglo to them (my ethnic background is German/Scandinavian), and I suspect that they were

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[8] **Corpus Christi Caller Times, Nov. 10, 1999, p. 1.**

uncomfortable speaking Spanish to an Anglo, especially an Anglo professor. Finally, Spanish for many of my students was the language they spoke to the "abuelos," to their grandparents. It was a language they spoke in the home and perhaps with a few friends. It was not a formal language used in official situations. The students lacked the vocabulary and the practice required to speak Spanish in a university setting. Of course, this did not apply to most of the Mexican-American students from the Rio Grande Valley, who spoke Spanish fluently and were able to switch back and forth from Tex-Mex to Mexican Spanish at will.[9]

The literature of sociolinguistics makes a distinction between high and low varieties of languages in a number of countries/regions. Standard German (H) versus Swiss German (L) and Standard French (H) and Haitian Creole (L) are examples. Wardhaugh and others describe the informal rules which govern code-switching, which is to say whether the H or the L language/code will be used in a particular situation.[10] Standard Spanish and Tex-Mex are not nearly as distinct as Standard and Swiss German. However, the relationship between the two would seem to be a similar in one respect. In South Texas, Mexican or

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[9]Other students, I should add, were happy to speak Spanish with me. In many cases, the students became more relaxed, outgoing and friendly when we were speaking Spanish.

[10]See Ronald Wardhaugh, An Introduction to Sociolinguistics, 3rd. Ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), Ch. 4, "Choosing a Code," pp. 86-115. Wardhaugh defines the neutral term "code" as "any kind of system that two or more people employ for communication" (p. 86).

standard Spanish is considered the correct or high (H) language. Tex-Mex is considered the low (L) version of the language.[11]

To use the terminology of sociolinguistics, my students and I were engaged in code-switching behavior in our conversations in my office. But I was violating the rules. I was an older, high-status (for them), Anglo, university professor. The students expected to speak English (H) with me. They became confused and embarrassed when I asked them to speak Spanish--perhaps in part because they spoke Tex-Mex (L) rather than Mexican or standard (H) Spanish. It is presumably uncomfortable for one person in a conversation to use a high (H) code while the other uses a low (L) code--and even more so if this were to reverse the status relationship. This would be comparable to my addressing the students in Spanish as "Usted" (the polite form) while they addressed me as "Tu" (the familiar form).

One final story: One of our political science majors had lived the first ten years of his life in Monterrey and the second ten years in San Antonio. He was completely fluent in both Spanish and English and did not mix the two, as is common along the border. Upon moving to Kingsville, however, he told me that he had to learn Tex-Mex because his friends did not feel comfortable with him if he spoke either Spanish or English alone!

My point in relating these stories is to argue that, for the average, <u>Mexican-American</u> student at Texas A&M-Kingsville, Spanish--as taught in this university--

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[11]**The fact that most Mexican-Americans in South Texas are poor reinforces the high/low language distinction.**

is a foreign language! It is the high code spoken in Mexico, Spain, or South America, not the low code spoken in South Texas. It is the language spoken and written by those professors from Spain, Colombia, or Mexico, some of whom are considered arrogant. To the extent that our students speak "Spanish," it is generally the Tex-Mex dialect, which neither they nor the language faculty consider to be particularly valuable.[12] Moreover, most of the students do not know Spanish grammar and they cannot write well in that language. The Mexican-American secretary in the Political Science Department, for example, cannot read Spanish, although she speaks it fluently.

My impression is that our Mexican-American students do not identify strongly as high (H) Spanish speakers. Nor do they identify with Mexico. Mexico is the dirty, poor place their parents, grandparents, or great grandparents came from. For them, the name connotes the barren southern desert and dangerous border towns like Matamoros or Reynosa. Only a few first-generation Mexican-Americans with relatives on the other side want to live south of the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo. Few TAMUK students have been to central Mexico. Most have never been to Monterrey, a dynamic, industrial city nearly the size of Houston--and no further away from Kingsville. Mexican-American students at TAMUK are highly patriotic Americans; they are not Mexicans.

My argument to this point is that: 1) Mexican-Americans constitute a language community in South Texas; 2) Mexican-American students at TAMUK do

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[12]Words like "washateria"--Tex-Mex for "laundry"--tend to inspire amusement or disgust in a "pure" Spanish speaker. Linguists see this as a natural process of language development along a language border and tend to be less judgmental.

not strongly identify themselves as high (H) Spanish--as opposed to Tex-Mex (L)--speakers; 3) TAMUK students see Tex-Mex as a regional dialect of Spanish, with limited cultural and economic value; and 4) with the exception of first-generation immigrants, TAMUK students do not identify strongly with Mexico.

Finally, many of those Mexican-American students at TAMUK who do not speak Spanish well feel guilty about not being able to do so. The language is a strong condensation symbol for many--though not all-- Hispanics in South Texas Not being able to speak Spanish fluently reflects negatively on their sense of identity. I have heard students tell of being made fun of for looking Hispanic without being able to speak Spanish. These students are ashamed of having a strong English accent when trying to speak Spanish and of not being able to converse with their relatives who do not speak English. For these students, learning Spanish or Tex-Mex may be psychologically a highly rewarding experience.

The Politics of the Foreign Language Proposal

The importance of foreign language competence seems obvious to me. My father was a professor of foreign languages and I benefitted enormously from learning German and Spanish and from living for extended periods in Europe and Latin America. In the process of pushing the language competency proposal,

however, I learned--once again-- that the importance of foreign languages is not obvious to everybody.[13]

Universities are feudal systems composed of departmental/disciplinary fiefdoms, organized into colleges headed by Deans. Each department thinks that its programs and classes are more important than anyone else's programs and classes. Chemistry Department faculty, for example, are not likely to think that a course on the Spanish language would be more valuable to its students than any chemistry class. Nor is it possible to increase the total number of credit hours required of students at the university.

My initial proposal was for all departments to require students to take two years of a foreign language. It quickly became obvious that this was utopian. The various departments in Engineering, for example, are already booked solid. Students have hardly any elective classes. Nor could they graduate in four years if they had to take more classes. Moreover, the Texas Legislature is pushing to graduate students <u>faster</u>. It is trying to <u>reduce</u> number of classes required for graduation. Even in the College of Arts and Sciences, some departments are considering switching their B.A. programs to B.S. programs in order to avoid the foreign language requirement. In a university with enrollment problems, the key

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[13]An old joke asks: "What do you call a person who speaks several languages?" "Multilingual." "What do you call a person who speaks two languages?" "Bilingual." What do you call a person who speaks only one language?" "American."

argument is that foreign language requirements may cause students to go elsewhere.[14]

I thus changed tactics. I proposed that students be required to demonstrate foreign language competence rather than being required to take two years of a foreign language. Students who were already bilingual would need no extra work. Nor would extra work be required for students in programs which already had two-year foreign language requirements. The remaining students could fulfill the competency requirement either by taking two years of course work or by means of a program which already exists. They may receive two years of credit in Spanish in two months at an intensive language school in Cuernavaca, Mexico. The ultimate goal is to give high students planning to attend TAMUK an incentive to learn Spanish before coming to college.

The revised proposal to require foreign language competence would likely have come to nothing in the normal course of events–and. Only the Provost or the President have the authority to make such decisions--and then only with the blessing of the faculty Curriculum Committee. Approval of the Board of Regents may be required as well. Universities are very cumbersome beasts and it is difficult to get them to move in a new direction.

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[14]A proposal to weaken the two-year foreign language requirement for B.A. programs in the College of Arts & Sciences was defeated in an A&S Deans/Chairs meeting the year before last. Long time foreign language Chair Sylvie Debevec Henning reports similar experiences at SUNY Platsburgh and East Carolina University. She writes: "As chair, I have never been able to count on other departments, whether in the College of Arts and Sciences or in the professional schools, for concrete, as opposed to verbal, support of departmental foreign language programs. The reason was, and still is, fear that a strong foreign language requirement will reduce the number of majors in other programs." "Repetition with Variations over Time: Reflections on Ten Years as a Department Chair," ADFL Bulletin, Vol. 31, No. 3, Spring 2000, p. 12.

The 2010 Task Force

Something unusual happened in the year 2000. It was called the 2010 Task Force, headed by Agriculture Dean Charles DeYoung. This Task Force was the first exercise since my arrival at TAMUK in which the university community systematically participated in long-term planning. Whatever institution-wide planning had occurred before had largely been done by administrators alone, or in the course of the annual budgetary process. This time, there was to be university-wide participation! Eight committees were created to study the operations of the entire university. Faculty, staff and students were invited to volunteer. Sensing an opportunity, I volunteered my services for the Academic Affairs Subcommittee. (I also sent a copy of my proposal to the President and the Provost. The Provost replied that the 2010 Committee would be the appropriate venue for a discussion of the matter.)

I did become a member of the Academic Affairs Committee. Ultimately, I also became Chair of a three-person Subcommittee on Basic Arts & Sciences. One of the other members of this subcommittee was Dr. Jacqueline Thomas, a powerful foreign language advocate who singlehandedly runs the French program. The other person was sympathetic to foreign language programs, although they are not his first priority. It was thus not difficult to get the language competency proposal accepted--first by the Subcommittee, and then by the full Committee on Academic Affairs of the 2010 Task Force. One of the reasons it was not difficult to obtain support for this or other proposals was that hardly

anybody on our Committee believed that we were likely to get what we wanted. We thought we were just making a wish-list. No priorities were specified and no costs were attached to proposals. Nor was there any indication of the resources that might be available for implementation of our projects. Previous exercises of this type, I was told, had come to naught. There was also an Advisory Council to the 2010 Task Force, composed of representatives of the larger Kingsville and regional community. It happened that one of our adjunct professors--a graduate of our department who now sported an M.A. from the John F. Kennedy School of Public Policy and a Harvard Law Degree--had been appointed to the Advisory Council. He was a native of Kingsville and a Mexican-American. ¡Que suerte!/ What luck! I lobbied this individual to support my proposal.

To my surprise, our Mexican-American, Harvard Law graduate did not initially support the foreign language competency proposal! Jose was a politically liberal Mexican-American, who grew up in a family of modest means. I thought "Jose's" ideology would lead him to favor requiring foreign language competence of our graduates. I was wrong! For one thing, he had not learned Spanish well himself and had never spent much time in Mexico.[15] Although Jose realized that speaking Spanish would be helpful to him as a lawyer, he was not impressed with stories of my personal experience. Nor was Jose impressed with

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[15]Unfortunately (from my perspective), quite a number of Mexican-American parents in the Kingsville area did not want their children to learn Spanish, thinking that to do so would impair their offspring's English proficiency. Parents apparently believed that, having mastered English, the children would do better in school and perhaps would also encounter less discrimination by Anglos.

my "liberal arts" arguments about how learning a foreign language can expand one's horizons and personality. He took the perspective of our undergraduate students and asked how requiring Spanish or another foreign language would benefit them economically? These are primarily poor kids who need to get jobs in the real world. The John F. Kennedy School had also taught "Jose" to look at cost/benefit ratios in evaluating public policies.

Friends and Foes

Who were my allies in this battle? The relatively poor TAMUK students, who did not strongly identify with high (H) Spanish or with Mexico, were not likely to demonstrate in the streets to be forced to learn a "foreign" language. Seventy seven percent of a sample of TAMUK students surveyed in the Fall of 2001 did indicate an interest in improving their foreign language ability.[16] However, it is pretty clear that their first priorities are to graduate, get a job, and make some money. Although the foreign lanaguage faculty--and several English professors--were supportive, their institutional position was weak, there being no

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[16]See footnote No. 5. 57% of those surveyed wished to learn or improve their Spanish. French was the second preference with 36%.

Foreign Language Department as such. I even failed, as Chair, to get support from my own department! My tenured colleagues, all but one of whom are either bilingual or trilingual, were sympathetic to my position. They just didn't think it was a high priority matter. And for our department, they were right! Nor was the outside community a likely source of help. South Texas is a conservative, rural area. An ethnically-based, radical movement--a political party called Raza Unida--had failed in the 1970s. The term "chicano" has radical connotations and is rarely used here. Hispanics in South Texas are called Mexican-Americans. Ideological support for a Spanish language emphasis is thus weak.[17] This is not California. TAMUK's Bilingual Education program might provide some support for my proposal. However, Bilingual Ed. is a minority voice in the College of Education, which has no overall foreign language requirement--surprising as this might seem in the context of South Texas.

The TAMUK faculty is primarily Anglo. From my perspective, the main positive influence--aside from a small group of Mexico fanatics--has been the successful Transculturation Program. This program, run by Drs. Rosario Torres Raines and her husband Ward Albro, had for several years taught a semester-long seminar on South Texas culture to dozens of TAMUK faculty and staff. The idea was to teach our predominantly Anglo professors about the Mexican-American culture of South Texas so the faculty could better understand and relate to the students. This seminar concludes with two to three weeks in an

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[17]See Joshua Fishman, Language and Nationalism (Rowley, Mass: 1972), for a useful discussion of how language usage/policy and nationalism interact.

Intensive Spanish Institute in Cuernavaca, Mexico--paid for by the university. Through this program, a significant percentage of the faculty had learned to appreciate the importance of the Spanish language in our South Texas context.

Finally, there was the university administration, also mainly staffed by Anglos at the higher levels. My biggest hope--and the person with the most authority--was the President. General Marc Cisneros was, and is, Mexican-American. He speaks fluent Spanish and is a native of the South Texas town of Premont. His position on requiring foreign language competency was unknown--but potentially positive, I thought.

What about the other side? Who was opposed to requiring foreign language competency? I suppose the biggest enemy was institutional inertia. That and the vested interests of departments and colleges. There are probably also people who are psychologically disinclined to support things "foreign," but they do not stand up and shout. In our South Texas environment, it is politically incorrect to be obviously biased against Spanish or what is Mexican.

A Viable Strategy?

I came across what seemed to be a viable strategy/argument rather by accident. I was convinced of the importance of foreign language competence but was having trouble proving it. The relevant clientele groups were not responding to the types of arguments I was making. Either I was using the wrong paradigm, or I had no concrete evidence to support the kinds of arguments that

would be accepted. Then one day, the head of Career Services, Ms Susan Dollar, suggested that I take a survey of recruiters at her periodic Job Fairs. She knew from experience that recruiters were looking for graduates who were bilingual. What a great idea!

The job recruiters surveyed were emphatic about the importance of foreign language competence. Eighty-five percent of the recruiters surveyed at the 11/07/00 TAMUK Education Job Fair said the organizations they represented would be more likely to hire an applicant who could demonstrate foreign language competence. Forty-one percent of these recruiters said their organizations would pay more for such hires. For the TAMUK Job Fair for all job categories, held on 1/11/00, the respective percentages were: 42% more likely to hire an applicant competent in a foreign language and 25% likely to pay a higher salary to such a person.

I finally had some evidence which seemed convincing to everyone: the students, the Mexican-American community, the university administrators, and Anglo elites in general. It is not accidental that this evidence is practical, that it is economic in nature, and that it deals with individuals rather than groups of people. In this context, at least, salaries paid to TAMUK graduates are referential rather than condensation symbols.

In itself, however, the data on demand for foreign language competency in the job market was insufficient. It was necessary to generalize the argument to make my proposal seem relevant to the specific objectives of the Top Ten in 2010 Task Force. Exactly how would requiring foreign language competency of

our students help make TAMUK one of the best universities in Texas within a decade?

The Rationale

In the Report of the Academic Issues Subcommittee, we argued that a number of factors made it unlikely that TAMUK would succeed in its goal of becoming a top ten Texas public university by the year 2010. To begin with, ours is a small university, located in a rural area which is not growing in population. Consequently, the university has stagnant enrollment. Since TAMUK is not growing quickly, it can expect little extra funding from the State of Texas. Since funding is limited, faculty salaries are low. It is thus difficult to attract outstanding professors. Nor do we have the money to provide outstanding programs and services. Our students tend to be poor and are not well prepared for college. Since most of the students are poor, ill-prepared, and often work part-time, large percentages drop out. The six-year graduation rate is low. All these factors contribute to a low score in the annual U.S. News and World Report College Rankings. (The university also has important strengths--such as good teaching, small classes, faculty research and grants, etc.-- but enumerating them was not in my interest at this point.)

The punch line--again economic in nature--was that we needed to look for comparative advantages to compensate for our significant disadvantages. I indicated the following:

1) We are located near Mexico in the age of NAFTA;
2) We have the status of a border institution, which means that most Mexican nationals need pay only in-state tuition;
3) Most of our students are Mexican-Americans, many speak Spanish, and most are attuned to Mexican-American culture;
4) People in Kingsville are friendly and courteous;
5) We have warm winters and are within an hour of the Padre Island beaches and the attractive city of Corpus Christi.

To date, the university has made little use of the advantages listed above. We have particularly failed to see our bilingual/bicultural students as a comparative advantage--except in facilitating the recruitment of students for Mariachi Band and insofar as the minority status of the university makes it easier to obtain federal grants. In fact, however, our Mexican-American students constitute is an ENORMOUS advantage! No Texas university to the north of TAMUK has such a high percentage of Spanish speakers! This means that most of our students, although relatively poor in financial terms, are quite advanced in terms of foreign language (Spanish) and transcultural skills. By requiring foreign language competency of all of our graduates, we could make a name for ourselves and become Number One in Texas in this area! This would be a public relations coup and would help us recruit good students!

I also noted in our Report that the University of Monterrey, Mexico requires a score of 500 on the TOEFEL exam in English as a requirement for graduation!

How is it that Mexicans can clearly see the importance of English while we, in South Texas, fail to understand the importance of Spanish?

One other strategy was considered, but not yet acted upon. I considered going to the President of Texas A&M-International University in Laredo and to the President of The University of Texas-Pan American in Edinburgh with my proposal for requiring foreign language competency of all undergraduates. Their universities have percentages of Spanish speakers which are even higher than those at TAMUK. Would these institutions be interested in implementing my proposal? After all, we are presumably interested in raising educational and economic levels in the entire region, not just in Texas A&M-Kingsville. It would be nice for TAMUK to be the first Texas, public university to really push foreign languages, but it would be good if other universities did so as well. Moreover--and, alas, this is the kicker--one of the most persuasive arguments for doing something in a university is that a competitive neighboring institution has already done it! We can't afford to fall behind, after all! The fastest way to get TAMUK to do something might be to get somebody else to do it first![18]

The Outcome

So what happened? Well, the 2010 Task Force met with the community Advisory Council. Then, the Task Force had a retreat to decide what to put in the

[18]**This was one of the most effective arguments for instituting an honors program at TAMUK.**

final version of the plan. Finally, there were two open hearings to get feedback from students, faculty, staff, and people from the Kingsville area. The foreign language section got a couple of positive comments, but that was all--perhaps because it was only a proposal to be considered. The controversial matters were whether TAMUK was to remain an open administration institution (the Report was against this) and whether or not we should aspire to Division I athletics. Ultimately, the 2010 Task Force Report was printed in a very attractive format. President Cisneros said that the Report would be a living document, continually modified. It would serve, in effect, as the university's master plan. At the end of the 2000-2001 academic year, however, President Cisneros resigned to take a position as CEO of the Kenedy Foundation in South Texas.

Dr. Kay Clayton, the Provost, was named Interim President for the current academic year. A Presidential Search is now underway. Where does this leave the Report of the 2010 Task Force? And where does it leave the foreign language competency proposal? No one knows. A great deal depends upon the choice of a new President. One thing we do know is that new Presidents rarely stay with the plans of their predecessors. They want to make their own marks--and as a result often make little lasting impact on the institutions they head for a brief time.

Where do we go from here with the foreign language competency proposal? Max Weber once wrote that "Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards. ... Only he has the calling for politics who is sure that he shall not crumble when the world from his point of view is too stupid or too base for what

he wants to offer."[19] Those who do not have a vocation for politics are better advised to tend to their departmental gardens. Those who do will be following the selection process for the new President. One positive sign is that the job description indicates a preference for someone who is bilingual. Foreign language competency, with all its denotations and connotations, should thus be part of our Presidential search process as well.

The Future of Foreign Language Competency

As a matter of speculation, I would predict that support for mastery of a second language in the United States will increase substantially in years to come. To be sure, this is a dialectical matter with significant forces on both sides. On the one hand, many are opposed to what is called bilingual education (which normally focuses upon success in school rather than on competency in two languages). There is also a significant "English Only" movement in the U.S.[20] For many, English is a key condensation symbol representing the nation as a whole. For such people, the use of "foreign" languages threatens national identity. On the other side, as indicated previously, there is now considerable economic demand for competency in foreign languages. Even more importantly, the Population Projection Program of the U.S. Census Bureau predicts that the

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[19] **"Politics as a Vocation." In From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946, p. 128.**

[20] **See James Crawford, ed., Language Loyalties: A Source Book on the Official English Controversy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).**

United States will be 24.3% Hispanic by the year 2050![21] This is a political earthquake and both political parties have their ears to the ground. For the first time ever, substantial amounts of Spanish were spoken from the podium in both the Republican and Democratic Party Conventions held prior to the November, 2000 presidential election. Both George W. Bush and Al Gore made a point of speaking Spanish during the campaign. Bush won 43% of the normally Democratic Hispanic vote in Texas in the 2000 presidential election. [22] Much of his success with Hispanics resulted from Bush's modest ability with the Spanish language--and from the fact that his sister-in-law is Mexican. (As Governor, Bush also took public policy positions favorable to Mexico.)

My prediction is that the political effects of Latino in-migration and the resulting demand for foreign language competency will win the day over the politics of xenophobia, although not immediately and not everywhere. Competency in Spanish, in particular, is the wave of the future in the United States--and not just along the border. The only question is whether South Texas schools and universities will ride the wave or be sucked along with it later. I would prefer the former.

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[21] **Calculated from National Population Projections I. Summary Files. http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/natsum-T-3.html; accessed 16 January, 2002.**

[22] **Michael Barone & Richard Cohen, The Almanac of American Politics: 2002 (Washington, D.C.: National Journal), p. 27.**