

# The Value of Spanish: Shifting Ideologies in United States Language Teaching

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IN 1915, a group of educators and scholars founded the American Association of Teachers of Spanish (AATS) to promote and improve Spanish instruction in United States high schools and colleges. At that time, less than 3% of United States public high school students were enrolled in Spanish courses (Draper and Hicks), a percentage the AATS sought to increase, in part by raising the “prestige-value” of Spanish (Warshaw 226). Given that today, secondary and postsecondary enrollments in Spanish are higher than in all other non-English languages combined (Welles), it is tempting to conclude that efforts to raise the status of Spanish were astonishingly successful.

But do these enrollment patterns really reflect a more positive estimation of the cultural and intellectual value of Spanish? Are there other factors driving the relatively high enrollments in Spanish? Whereas there have been numerous discussions of how administrators might respond to the shift in enrollments from other languages to Spanish (e.g., Nichols; González), there have been far fewer attempts to analyze the reasons behind that shift. To better understand the current popularity of Spanish, it is worthwhile to review the history of Spanish teaching in the United States, situating it within the broader sociopolitical context by considering academia’s attitudes toward Spanish, the cultures with which it is associated, and the people who speak it. So, too, it is imperative to consider the changes that have taken place in the societal role and objectives of higher education, changes that are themselves linked to changes in funding and enrollment patterns, tuition costs, and student debt levels. These seismic shifts in the ideological conception and societal function of the uni-

versity are crucial to gaining an understanding of historical and contemporary language enrollment patterns, and such an understanding can guide curricular decisions to best meet the educational needs of our students and society at large.

From the period of British colonial rule through the eighteenth century, Latin and Greek were the languages offered and required by colleges. Although the first North American colleges had the goal of educating clergy, training schoolmasters, and creating political leaders, they were also intended to produce a cultured elite (Rudolph). Only a tiny fraction of the population attended college: at the time of United States independence there were just nine colleges in the United States, and in 1800 only 1% of the white male population aged eighteen to twenty-one (essentially the only group that could attend college) attended (Perkin). North American colleges largely followed the model of Cambridge, Oxford, and other European institutions of higher learning, and one of their goals was to demonstrate the cultural and intellectual weight of the new society (Jencks and Riesman). The study of Latin and Greek was an important component of a classical humanistic education and thus fit well with the colleges’ social function as “preserver of ancient traditions” (Rudolph 411). Moreover, it was widely accepted that the study of Latin—the most

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“logical” language, according to the linguistic ideologies of the time—constituted excellent mental training and promoted psychological discipline.

This is not to say that English-speaking colonists had no interest in learning Spanish. However, from the earliest days of what was to become the United States, the motivation for Spanish study was primarily instrumental; that is, knowledge of Spanish was seen as offering utilitarian advantages, rather than cultural or intellectual growth or prestige. The potential practical uses of Spanish included both religious and economic expansion. In the early seventeenth century some New Englanders saw Spanish as a valuable tool for proselytizing in Spain’s American colonies. Similarly, newspaper advertisements for Spanish teachers in port towns of the British colonies demonstrated interest in Spanish for commercial purposes—specifically, for trade with Spanish colonies (Spell). In the second half of the eighteenth century a few colleges introduced Spanish, together with other modern languages, into the curriculum. At the urging of Benjamin Franklin, Spanish was offered together with French and German at the Public Academy of the City of Philadelphia, later to become the University of Pennsylvania, and Thomas Jefferson’s influence led to their inclusion at William and Mary College (Spell). Nonetheless, colleges’ focus on educating gentlemen meant that the teaching and learning of Spanish that did take place in this period generally occurred in private lessons and academies rather than at high schools or institutions of higher learning. The approximately two-thirds of colleges that reported requiring modern language study as part of an undergraduate degree required French, German, or both (Hewett).

In the nineteenth century, public interest in Spanish continued to grow. The purchase of Louisiana from the French government (1803), the acquisition of Florida and the southwestern territories from Spain (1819), and the annexation of a large swath of Mexican territory (1848) meant that the United States now had a significant Spanish-speaking population. But, more important, the military’s demand for Spanish-speaking personnel increased as tensions rose between the United States and Spain, as Spain tried to retain its colonial possessions in the face of both independence movements and United States territorial encroachment. The independence of Mexico and Central America brought greater commercial opportunities for United States businesses

in the former Spanish colonies, whereas the United States invasion of Mexico (1848) and the prospect of additional annexations continued to raise the military value of Spanish. Spanish had become what the terminology of the early twenty-first century calls a critical language, one seen as particularly useful for United States military and commercial objectives. This is a striking contrast with Latin and Greek, or with French and German, which, while occasionally portrayed as more practical than the classical languages, were nonetheless seen as embodying great literary and cultural traditions.

The nineteenth century also saw an exponential increase in the number of colleges in the United States, as well as a dramatic jump in the percentage of white males aged eighteen to twenty-one attending college. By 1870, the number of colleges had reached 560, and in 1900, 5% of white males eighteen to twenty-one attended college (Perkin). The structure and goals of higher education had also begun to expand, and the university movement, which emphasized graduate training, research, and scholarly activity in addition to undergraduate teaching, was growing. Responding to the public perception that colleges were failing to meet the needs of an agricultural and industrial society, Congress established the land-grant colleges. These colleges were created in part to provide greater access to higher education among people living in rural areas. In addition, the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 dictated a more practical curriculum, one that included agricultural and technical education, as well as professional training. In their attempt to make college education more relevant to contemporary society, the land-grant colleges represented “a protest against the dominance of the classics in higher education” (Natl. Assn.).

Not surprisingly, the move toward more relevant, practical, and accessible education, as well as a rejection of the classics, led toward a greater role for modern languages at the college level. The broader inclusion of modern languages in academia was both reflected and promoted by the founding of the Modern Language Association, in 1883. The teaching of “living” languages generally was not accompanied by changes in language-teaching methodology or focus. Indeed, the pedagogical approach to the teaching of the modern languages was largely adopted from the teaching of the classical languages; the emphasis was on literary texts, and grammatical analysis and translation were the most

common methodologies. Oral language use was not stressed, nor were more practically or professionally oriented topics covered. As the MLA's constitution states, the purpose of the MLA was to promote the study of "modern languages *and their literatures*" (957, emphasis added). This emphasis on literature can perhaps be explained by considering that those who supported more practically oriented curricula

wanted to provide their sons with an alternative to the apparently useless classical instruction given at established colleges, but they nevertheless wanted their children to hold their own in conversation with lawyers, bankers, and other bigshots educated at traditional institutions. (Jencks and Riesman 4)

An important role of college education was still the socialization of students into the educated elite and the conferral of social and cultural capital. Familiarity with the great works constituted one type of symbolic capital.

Just as the trend toward more practically oriented education did not alter the literary focus of language education, the public discussions regarding the practical value of Spanish did not lead to the widespread inclusion of Spanish in college or high school curricula. Despite making some inroads—such as the founding of an endowed professorship in French and Spanish at Harvard in 1815 and its inclusion at a few colleges in the 1820s and 1830s—Spanish was still rare in higher education (Leavitt). It was also rare at the secondary level, even with the significant increases in language enrollments of the late nineteenth century. In 1890, 51% of public high school students studied a language other than English, whereas 88.6% did so in 1905. However, the most commonly studied modern language was German, which had more than double the enrollments of French (22.5% and 10.1% respectively). Jamie Draper and June Hicks do not report any public high school students studying Spanish until 1910, at which time they represented less than 1% of high school enrollments (compared with 9.9% studying French, 23.7% studying German, and 49% studying Latin). Of course, college attitudes and policies toward Spanish had a direct effect on high school offerings. In 1910, none of the approximately 33% of United States colleges that required two to four years of modern language study for entrance accepted Spanish (Herman), and thus it is not surprising that only 2% of high schools even offered Spanish.

The overwhelming preference for German and French in both secondary and postsecondary contexts reflected academia's continued commitment to "the ideal of the gentleman, of the honorable and responsible citizen of the enlightened and gracious mind" (Rudolph 448) and modern language curricula's related focus on "high culture" and literature. Neither educators nor the general public regarded Spanish as a language of great cultural achievement, and thus it was not included in such high-minded scholarly pursuits. The devaluing of cultures associated with Spanish was sometimes made explicit in educators' discussions of which languages should be offered and what criteria should guide such decisions. In 1922 William A. Cook, discussing this issue "from the standpoint of cultural values," stated that "German and French are the languages of great literatures as well as of science; Spanish, relatively speaking, is the language of neither" (276–77). Such views also help explain why Spanish was not mentioned at the founding of the MLA and was only "barely visible" in MLA conventions and journals during the association's early years (Leavitt 616).

Not only was Spanish literature little known and poorly regarded in comparison with French and German literatures, but Spanish civilization was also held in low esteem. Remnants of the "black legend" cast a dark shadow over Spain and Spaniards, portraying them as having been particularly brutal and barbaric in their colonization of the Americas in comparison with the British. Further, the Spanish-American War had contributed to a negative view of Spain in the United States. In contrast, France and the United States were allies, and Americans tended to see the French as a people devoted to political freedom and democratic principles. Although the public's perception of Germany would deteriorate dramatically in the years leading up to World War I, at the turn of the twentieth century Germany was seen as a model of scientific and educational advances, and the university movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought to emulate German research universities.

In addition to such notions regarding the relative cultural value of European civilizations and languages, attitudes toward Spanish were shaped by racial ideologies focused more specifically on the Americas. Even the negative stereotypes of Spaniards were less disparaging than those of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. For one, racial hierarchies of the time privileged Europeans in general, and

northern Europeans in particular, and subordinated African, American, and Asian peoples. Further, in this era of race science and public anxiety regarding racial purity, the mixed Spanish and Indian background of many Mexicans was popularly viewed with derision and antipathy and served to justify the violation of their civil and human rights. Arguments against further United States expansion in Mexico and the Caribbean were often couched in both linguistic and racial terms, the incorporation of large numbers of Spanish-speaking people being seen as a threat to the solidifying construction of the United States as a white English-speaking nation. Because language and race were closely linked in the public imaginary, racism toward the inhabitants of territories annexed from Spain and Mexico was manifested in reference to the Spanish language in addition to characteristics considered to be biologically based.

Not only did racism toward Spanish-speaking people in the Americas affect public attitudes toward Spanish and perceptions of the relative worth of different modern languages in education—attitudes and perceptions that in turn affected enrollments—it also played a role in shaping the Spanish curriculum itself. Although the push to learn Spanish was related to United States interests in Latin America, specifically to military and commercial interests, both high school and college curricula generally focused on Spain. According to J. R. Spell, at least through the nineteenth century there were no textbooks of Spanish that dealt with American themes or language, and no Spanish-teaching faculty members at Harvard had traveled to Mexico or anywhere else in Latin America. The first course on Latin American literature was not offered until 1916, at the University of Missouri (Spell). Academia explicitly accorded higher status not only to Spanish literature but also to peninsular—particularly Castilian—language, as is clear from early-twentieth-century discussions of the best variety of Spanish to teach students. In many ways, this academic elevation of the European and subordination of the American has continued to this day, as has the displacement of practical interest in Latin America to the study of Spanish cultural production and language (Fernández; García).

The entry of the United States into World War I had a dramatic effect on modern language instruction in the United States, including Spanish its first real entrée into the curriculum nationwide.

One logical consequence would have been for enrollments in German to increase, given its new strategic value, as had happened in the nineteenth century with Spanish before the war with Spain and has happened in the twenty-first century with Arabic during this period of increased United States military involvement in the Middle East. In fact, German enrollments did rise in the years leading up to the war; 22.5% of high school students studied German in 1905, 23.7% in 1910, and 24.4% in 1915 (Draper and Hicks 5). The ratio of students studying German to French also increased in this period. But with the war under way, anti-German prejudice increased, numerous anti-German laws were enacted, and many schools stopped offering German language and literature courses. At the same time, there was a growing public interest in Pan-Americanism, an economic and political and cultural movement that highlighted Spanish. This interest led to a reconfiguring of language enrollment patterns that firmly established Spanish in the United States academy. By 1922, only 0.6% of public high school students were enrolled in German classes, whereas 15.5% studied French and 11.3% Spanish (Draper and Hicks 5).

It was in this sociohistorical context that the AATS was founded. It is not surprising that members were celebratory: never had there been so much scholarly interest in the study of Spanish. But early articles in *Hispania*, the association's journal, also reflect anxiety regarding the longevity and development of that interest and an acute awareness that the "prestige value" of Spanish did not equal that of French, German, and Latin, a situation Hispanists sought to correct. Thus, whereas proponents of modern language study generally were split between those who stressed the practical value of modern languages in comparison with classical languages and those who emphasized their literary and cultural worth (Herman), in the postwar period advocates of Spanish tended to stress prestige. They warned that staking the value of Spanish to its commercial usefulness would prove ineffective, as students were unlikely to achieve the high levels of proficiency required for business activity, and that such practical concerns were insufficient to maintain student interest. Instead, defenders of Spanish extolled the virtues of the Spanish literary and artistic traditions and the gloriousness of Spain's history. Highlighting the complexity and logic of Spanish syntax, they argued that Spanish study was as valuable for the

development of “brain loops” as the study of German or Latin was (Wilkins 213). Further, they sought to portray Spanish as a language of peace and international cooperation by stressing its importance in Pan-Americanism. And as if these reasons were not enough to justify the study of Spanish, advocates also suggested that it was particularly useful for the (subsequent) study of Latin—a language whose literary and cultural value was never challenged—and of English grammar and rhetoric.

Following the end of hostilities between the United States and Germany, German enrollments never returned to their prewar levels, peaking at just 3.3% of public high school students in 1968 (Draper and Hicks 5). The decrease in German study was part of a general downward trend in modern and classical language enrollments, a trend that reflected the broader isolationist sentiment in the United States in the interwar period. The lack of interest in studying non-English languages was also part of a growing nativist reaction against the large-scale immigration of the early twentieth century. Unlike earlier northern European immigrants, the more recent southern and eastern European newcomers were seen as threatening the racial and cultural identity of the United States. With race ideologically linked to language and United States national identity progressively constructed as monolingual in English, non-English languages were increasingly seen as un-American (Pavlenko). Given the portrayal of the use of languages other than English as unpatriotic and the elimination—and in some places, criminalization—of language teaching, it is not surprising that enrollments declined until World War II recast language study as part of a patriotic war effort.

The perception that languages were valuable for national security increased during and immediately following World War II, and so did congressional support for modern language study. Secondary and postsecondary language enrollments increased, as did the percentage of undergraduate institutions requiring language study for entrance or graduation. The military’s demand for personnel able to converse in languages other than English challenged reading as both the primary objective and the preferred teaching methodology, the pedagogical approach previously recommended by the MLA. The army’s Specialized Training Program’s emphasis on oral proficiency also had long-lasting influence on nonmilitary language instruction. Nonetheless,

the progressive emphasis on the utilitarian value of languages did not lead to a rejection of literary study as a primary objective of advanced language study. Literature was increasingly portrayed as a means by which to understand other cultures—now a personal and national obligation—rather than simply part of a humanistic education or an aesthetic experience, but it remained at the core of the undergraduate modern language major. This new emphasis on proficiency in lower-level language courses and the continued emphasis on literature in upper-level courses contributed to the oft-cited and lasting split between language and content.

The renewed interest in languages did not affect all languages in the same way. With the increased attention to instrumental motivations for language study, Latin lost further ground to modern languages. Cold war concerns and competition with the Soviet Union meant that Russian was seen as particularly important for the national interest, leading to increased Russian enrollments at the college level, as well as the limited introduction of Russian at the high school level. As utilitarian motives of language study were stressed, French enrollments declined relative to Spanish, which increasingly was seen as useful in the United States efforts to consolidate economic and political influence in Latin America and to quell popular uprisings perceived as threatening to United States interests. By the late 1940s, the percentage of public high school students studying Spanish (8.2%) was nearly twice that of those studying French (4.7%) (Draper and Hicks 5). Enrollments in Spanish were likely augmented by the fact that an increasing percentage of students were taking language as a requirement, together with students’ belief that Spanish was easier than French, a persisting misapprehension noted by educators at least since the early twentieth century and one likely rooted in lasting ethn racial prejudice (see Foster; Wilkins). Through the 1960s, language requirements and enrollments continued upward, as did the relative percentage of students studying Spanish.

The decades following World War II also initiated a period of exponential growth in higher education. Much of this growth was federally funded; the GI Bill covered the tuition costs for over two million veterans, and government initiatives provided monies for university-based science and technology research. More women and minorities attended college, a trend bolstered by the civil and

women's rights movements and the elimination of legal discrimination. Undergraduate education went from being an elite to a mainstream endeavor: over half of the high school class graduating in 1972 entered a postsecondary institution (Snyder, Tan, and Hoffman). As higher education became increasingly practically and professionally oriented and an undergraduate degree became increasingly important for white-collar employment, students reacted against general education requirements. Because of student pressure, as well as a lack of conviction on the part of university administrators regarding the "relevancy" of language study, colleges began to reduce or eliminate language requirements (Turner 191). Through the 1970s, the number of four-year institutions requiring a foreign language for entrance or graduation dropped dramatically (Brod and Huber), contributing to an 18% decline in college foreign language enrollments from 1970 to 1980, despite the increase in the number of students in the same period (Huber 57). The number of BAs and MAs in French, German, and Spanish dropped by more than half (Snyder, Tan, and Hoffman), and secondary-school language enrollments also declined: only 21.3% of public high school students studied a modern language in 1982, compared with 27.7% in 1968 (Draper and Hicks 5).

Since the 1980s, the practical and preprofessional orientation of the undergraduate degree has solidified, and it is now naturalized in discussions about which colleges and majors represent the best investment. Student concern about the marketability of their degrees is partially attributable to the drastic reductions in public funding of higher education that have led to ballooning student debt, averaging around \$30,000 at graduation (Williams). The focus on the practical applications of college study and on the postgraduation value of particular subjects is further promoted by the spread of academic capitalism, which integrates market-driven activities throughout the university and presents students to employers as "output/product" (Slaughter and Rhoades 2). The business orientation of higher education is also bolstered by United States Department of Education funding for business education programs designed to promote the nation's economic competitiveness. In this climate, the humanities have lost prominence in universities, as they are generally unable to bring in large sums of external funding, produce lucrative patents, or attract undergraduates concerned about their future employment.

However, whereas in the 1970s the practical emphasis of the BA degree had led to modern language enrollment decreases, since the 1980s the same conception of higher education has brought enrollment gains. As always, not all languages are equally affected by changes in the sociohistorical context. Second-language ability is increasingly commodified as a job skill, rather than a symbol of education and cultural capital. While the prestige of the cultural and literary traditions associated with a given language still affects the public's estimation of that language and its speakers and may influence some students' choice of which language to study, it is no longer a primary factor for the majority. Instead, the definition of United States national interest as global economic competitiveness has favored those languages considered useful for international business or for capturing niche markets within the United States. In addition, since September 11, 2001, there has been a growing demand in national security-related institutions for people who can speak languages regarded as crucial for "the war on terrorism." Another factor likely influencing students' choice of languages is their own ethnolinguistic background: since the 1980s there have been important increases in the number of immigrants and United States-born children who speak languages other than English at home. But while these factors can help us understand some recent enrollment trends such as the relative decline of French, German, and Russian, as well as the relative gains in Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese, they can only partially account for the huge disparity between Spanish enrollments and those of all other languages.

Another cause of the relative popularity of Spanish at the postsecondary level is that many students choose to continue studying whichever language they studied at the secondary level. For most students, that language is Spanish: in 2000 71% of students at public high schools studying a modern language were studying Spanish (Draper and Hicks 5). In addition to students' preferences, this percentage also reflects the limited language offerings at the majority of high schools. Further, Spanish's status as the *de facto* second national language means that students who do not have a preference for a particular language will likely choose Spanish.<sup>1</sup> Thus students who are studying language to fulfill a requirement rather than a personal inclination—a group that constitutes the majority of students enrolled in modern language courses—are

most likely to choose Spanish (Eisenberg). The perception that Spanish is easier than other languages also leads students who would prefer not to study any language to choose Spanish.

Returning to the question posed at the outset of this article about the meaning of the high enrollments of Spanish relative to other languages, this historical review of secondary and tertiary language study in the United States suggests that such enrollments should be attributed less to an increase in the prestige value of Spanish than to the commodification of language and the contemporary fixation on the marketability of particular types of knowledge and education. Current educational and demographic trends suggest that Spanish enrollments are likely to remain high relative to other languages, and thus it is not surprising that recent issues of the *ADFL Bulletin* as well as numerous other publications have explored the implications for language department curricula, staffing, and management. Several scholars have argued that because many students' motivation for language study is instrumental, Spanish departments should offer courses more tailored to students' career goals. Others, noting that many students lack interest in studying language beyond what is required of them, argue that we must find ways to convince students of the professional relevance and economic value of language generally and of Spanish in particular. Persuading students that language study is a worthwhile endeavor and helping them achieve their professional aspirations are clearly legitimate and important goals. However, instead of taking for granted students' motivations for their choice of language or implicitly reinforcing the notion that languages are of value primarily as commodities to be traded in the marketplace, a critical language education should make such motivations an object of inquiry. An understanding of shifting ideologies surrounding language teaching can help educators explore with their students the myriad reasons why someone might want to study another language as well the ideological underpinnings of society's and their own notions about the relative value of different languages.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup>This is not to suggest widespread appreciation or acceptance of Spanish by the general populace or to deny the well-documented tendency for language shift to English. Instead, it is meant to acknowledge the historical presence of Spanish in the United States as well as its present status as the most

widely spoken non-English language in the United States. According to the Census Bureau's 2005 American Community Survey, 62% of all people over five years old who spoke a language other than English at home spoke Spanish.

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