

The Articulation of Babel

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Sketch of a rational plan for language and area studies in intelligence.

The diversity of opinions expressed in almost any discussion of intelligence work about the extent to which operational officers and analysts need to receive foreign language training reflects, it seems to me, an immaturity in our thinking. Our concept of language training seems not to have kept pace with the maturing of our contemporary American intelligence service, which now has a twenty-year history of global operation.

It is true we have *done* things about spreading language skills. An observer is dazzled by the wide variety of language-area programs set up by the defense agencies since World War II. Viewed quantitatively, the proliferation is impressive; but examined as to whether they promise to satisfy our longterm, world-wide needs for communication with other peoples, these many-sided efforts inspire serious doubts. The very variety of the programs suggests that we have continued the brushfire approach taken during World War II, when our desperate need for linguists dictated makeshift emergency measures like those of the Army Specialized Training Program. At least it shows that we have arrived at no overall answer to the challenge but rather a multiplicity of answers, conditioned by the immediate needs of particular components and by the training philosophy--or lack of it--of different administrators in the various echelons. Each answer can be seen to have its own individual merits, but one searches vainly for any underlying philosophy lending general purpose and direction to the aggregation.

To compound the confusion, particularly in the last two years or so, an affliction that might be called the oriental syndrome has attacked many Americans, symptomized in their belief that our language problem can

be solved merely by enrolling as many people as possible in oriental language courses. The application of this theory leads to a demonstration of a sort of linguistic Parkinson's law, in which ever diminishing returns are reached by an increasing number of persons who study complex oriental tongues for an ever briefer time. Although we do have a tremendous need for skill in language outside the conventional West European groups, this need will never be filled by having vast numbers of students dribble away their time in short-term programs without ever reaching functional proficiency in writing, speaking, or reading.

Planning is the answer to the language problem of the intelligence service, planning based on a long-range view of predictable requirements. No group of planners, to be sure, can have the clairvoyance to predict, for example, exactly which of the 800 languages of Black Africa will emerge from obscurity to significance by the year 1980. The plan must therefore have elements providing for flexibility with the changing geopolitical picture, as well as for emergencies. The main features such a plan should ideally have are sketched below.

Concentration on Specialists

We assume at the outset that, although language teaching in the American school system is now improving, thanks in part to the National Defense Education Act, we are still far from the day when we can recruit staff personnel in any numbers with prior real working knowledge of a second tongue. This means that we must be prepared to impart linguistic skills as necessary, but it does not mean that we must furnish equal opportunity for linguistic education to all. For the overwhelming majority of intelligence officers, while a moderate amount of language knowledge may be desirable, even that is not really essential. It is a minority group, the regional experts, for whom language-area training in depth is an absolute necessity. Language may be "good for everybody, but that doctrine as a principle of the training program lead to our frittering away of time and money. Twenty years of experience have demonstrated that the way *not* to build up our linguistic firepower is to put anyone to studying Bulgarian, Vietnamese, or Swahili merely because he "feels like it.

Let's begin our planning, then, with a two-way division of our personnel, separating the area specialists from generalists and others who have no particular geographical concentration. These latter our ideal Language Academy could be prepared to furnish an intermediate-level working knowledge of one of the major Western languages--German, French, Spanish, Italian, or possibly Portuguese. The regional specialist, on the other hand, whether analyst or operational officer, would be given all-out training, mainly in languages and cultures outside Western Europe, to match and complement his mastery as an analyst of one of the social or natural sciences or his expertise in tradecraft as an operational officer.

The strength in which languages would be covered would be determined through priority lists drawn up and periodically reviewed by a committee administering the plan, which would call in all the interagency and academic support it needed. Among the highest priority languages at present would be listed Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, Burmese, Indonesian, Hindustani, Arabic, and Swahili, along with the no longer "exotic" Russian. At lower priority would be listed Hebrew, Pashto, Persian, Afrikaans, Hausa, and others. Staff personnel would be given every opportunity to express their preferences in language study, but service needs would be the determining consideration; the individual might end up with his second or third or even fourth choice of tongues. Any principle short of this would create a surplus of skills in the popular languages and a deficit in those which lack appeal. Our present overly permissive practices in this respect tend also to encourage a dilettante rather than a professional approach to language.

This clear differentiation between specialist and non-specialist would effect a redistribution of the language-learning effort. We would no longer, for example, conduct a one-year Chinese class for four generalists and two specialists, in which the combined work of the six does not add up to one usable skill. Instead we would have two or three specialists in an all-out language-area program of five to six years' duration, part of it full time. Long before these specialists had completed the full program, they would have enough knowledge and insight to be useful at their desks in Washington or out in the field. At the same time the generalist without prior language equipment could get his innings too, basic training in a key Western tongue. Neither would the concentration on specialists preclude ad hoc linguistic aids and training for survival for personnel liable to find themselves stranded in some obscure corner of the world.

From Linguistics to Cultural Command

The language instruction prescribed for the specialist would be conducted according to advanced principles of scientific linguistics, making use of the latest electronic equipment. Oral-aural phases of communication would generally be stressed at the beginning, wherein native or bilingual instructors for spoken drill would be indispensable. Reading and then writing would follow. The area specialist should emerge from this training with an advanced command, short of native proficiency, of the spoken and written idiom.

His study in depth of the language itself would be vigorously backed by intensive and semi-intensive sociological study at the intelligence school, at academic centers in the United States, and when possible in the country where the language is spoken. He would learn to know not only the geography, history, politics, economics, literature, and social institutions of the country but also the informal beliefs, traditions, and ideals which make up the psyche of the society. With this profound exposure he should in time acquire the sort of empathy which makes possible a maximum yield from dealings with a people. He should come to penetrate their culture, an objective unattainable via the mechanistic approach to language exemplified in the tourist manuals, which teach you to parrot such phrases as "Where is the railway station?" or "I feel quite ill. Please call a doctor."

As an example of how this knowledge in depth might be applied, let's take a graduate in Russian from our Academy. A specialist in Soviet economics, he has an appointment to see Comrade Serge Gosplanov, Vice Consul in Paris, on some routine matter. Will he plan to concentrate the conversation, after the official amenities, on coal production statistics in the Donets Basin? Decidedly not. He expects the Russian, if he is true to his culture, to be hospitable rather than brusque, opening the way for the establishment of some sort of personal rapport. Our man will be prepared to chat about how the Dinamo Soccer team is doing and discuss the current chess match in Leningrad. He may compare a recent political development in Western Europe with a similar phenomenon during Russia's sixteenth-century Time of Troubles. As opportunities arise he can throw in a few Russian proverbs, so dear to

Russian hearts, or illustrate a point with lines from the revered poet Pushkin. Gosplanov, amazed and pleased by the American's feeling for things Russian, is likely to become expansive and may even indulge in confidences about Soviet policies from which he would ordinarily refrain. This kind of communication across cultures can be brought about despite opposing ideologies and national enmities.

Input of Effort

Our planned program will founder in the launching unless there is general appreciation and acceptance of the amount of time and effort a person must put into learning a language. Our experience now enables us to state with some precision how many months of study at a given intensity should on the average be allowed for attaining a given proficiency in any particular language. The romance and Germanic languages of Western Europe are the easiest; they can be learned comprehensively (speaking, reading, writing) in half the time it takes for the Slavic, Semitic, Finno-Ugric, African and other alphabetically written languages, and in a third of that required for those of the Far East that use ideographs.

Our generalist can probably become moderately proficient in German, say, in five months' time if he devotes all his working hours and three or four hours a night at home to it. Or he can stretch it out over 15 months at about three hours of class and study per working day. He will be able to understand most ordinary conversations, make himself understood while living or traveling among Germans, read fairly difficult texts with copious help from the dictionary, and write acceptable personal letters. The *specialist* in one of the easy languages, however, whom we wish to make as skilled as possible short of the virtually unattainable native proficiency, would need seven or eight months of full-time study or almost two years at part time, plus several months' residence in a country of that language. The specialist in Russian needs twice as long, and the specialist learning Chinese at a part-time speed would take about seven years, the last one spent in China.

That is not all. We shall need a considerable number of specialists who in addition to their primary language can also handle a cognate

secondary language or one otherwise closely related. Once the specialist is well advanced in his major) tongue the dean of our Academy ought to encourage him to undertake the study of a minor. If he is a Russian specialist, he might take Polish, Czech, Serbo-Croatian, or Bulgarian--or even wander from the Slavic family into Hungarian or Rumanian--to broaden his usefulness in dealing with the Soviet orbit. If he is a Mandarin expert, he might go into Cantonese, Wu, or one of the major Chinese dialects, or elect to do Japanese, Indonesian, or Laotian. The Arabist might choose Hebrew or another Middle Eastern language-- Persian, Turkish, Pashto, Kurdish, or Azerbaijani. The Hindustani major could either take one of the other important Indic tongues like Bengali or cross linguistic family lines into the Dravidian Telugu or Tamil.

The aims of the minor could be quite modest, probably limited to an intermediate reading knowledge for analysts or an elementary speaking knowledge for operators, skills they could acquire with six months to two years of part-time work. To this should be added some mild exposure to the culture of the people, in the form of a general survey of its history or literature. This minor program would help solve the problem of providing expertise on secondary yet strategic lands such as Tibet, Ceylon, Turkey, Hungary, Korea, Afghanistan, and even Benelux. For young intelligence officers planning their careers it would not require investing great blocks of time in exclusive study of a minor country which might lose its strategic importance as a result of international political vagaries.

How shall we find qualified and enthusiastic applicants for our ideal Language Academy? Are there stout-hearted men and women willing to volunteer for a rigorous, exacting, and time-consuming program which is certain to interfere with relaxed and pleasant living? Experience shows that just as the armed services usually have a surplus of personnel volunteering for paratroop and other hazardous assignments, intelligence agencies do not lack language-minded persons eager to specialize in regional studies. Motivation for language study is a many-sided and often imponderable thing. Some volunteers happen to feel an affinity for a certain language and people; some are moved by ethnic origin or social or marital attachments; some simply want to throw themselves into an off-beat specialty.

Applications for language training should be open to all, regardless of assignment; but selection from them should be rigorous. There should be a leisurely yet searching examination, partly through informal meetings, into the officer's longterm career potential for his organization.

Through a battery of psychological and linguistic tests along with personal interviews it should be determined that he has the aptitude and particularly the drive and motivation required. Time and again the utter futility or at least the poor returns from compulsory programs in which certain individuals are *ordered* to study such and such a language are brought home to training officers. While the conscientious person, realizing the value of language to his job assignment, may rally bravely to the challenge, his performance is rarely a superior one when brought about by fiat. Top results are most likely when compulsion from outside gives way to motivation from within, and the student adds that elusive third dimension of devotion which makes for excellence.

Follow-Through

When we have carefully selected well-qualified candidates and schooled them to the required proficiency, our work is still not done. All too often the thousands of dollars spent by a government agency on the training of a man in a much-needed tongue like Russian or Arabic go down the drain for lack of follow-up instruction or any opportunity to utilize the knowledge gained. Although it must be realistically admitted that it is not always possible to send a man to an area where his linguistic training will be useful, it is poor management not to provide at least enough refresher instruction to maintain his proficiency as part of the nation's reservoir of strategic language-area skills. Here our Academy could well borrow from a practice of the armed forces, which insist upon refresher training, at specified intervals, in most military specialties.

No matter how splendid the training and how dedicated the trainee, our linguistic master plan will still not work unless it is backed by an enlightened personnel management. For one thing, the trainee must have an assurance that he will not be penalized for making the gigantic effort which language-area work entails, that he will not be passed over in promotions because he is a "narrow specialist." This would of course require changing the practice, widespread in government, of reserving the higher grades for generalists with a supervisory knack. Every effort should also be made to create a flexibility of assignment, to minimize the specialist's risk of getting stuck in one geographical rut. In concrete terms, this means that our Chinese specialist should not be doomed to

shuttle eternally between Washington and Taipei, but should have opportunities to serve also in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, London, Delhi, and other capitals where large colonies of Chinese make his abilities fruitful for intelligence purposes.

As a corollary of this principle, the rotation planned for the specialist should be aimed at breaking down rather than perpetuating the distinction between analyst and operator. The language-area expertise of our ideally trained operational officer should make him useful also, for example, in the Office of National Estimates or in area analysis in any of the community's research components. At its best the system could produce some number of ambidextrous intelligence officers equally at home in Washington writing a report on the manpower problems of Szechwan province or handling a network of agents from Taipei.

There is a partial historical precedent for the type of program we are describing. In the twenties and thirties the government agencies and the armed services followed the practice of selecting a limited number of "language officers" to be dispatched abroad to study where the language in question was spoken. General Joe Stilwell became in this way a Chinese specialist for the Army. The Department of State sent Charles Bohlen and George Kennan to Paris to study Russian at the Ecoles de Langues Vivantes and to rub shoulders with the large Russian colony there. Dozens of other men were assigned to foreign capitals, mostly in the Orient, for language-area training in depth. It is significant that during the, forties and fifties these men were able to use their expertise in important substantive assignments and take a hand in the making of national policy.

Without some such systematic training plan as herein suggested we run the risk of finding ourselves short of first-rate hands to cope with areas of emerging importance—Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, south of the Sahara. During World War II and afterwards we were able to depend on refugees and displaced persons to handle many if not most of our language needs. This source has just about run dry, and at the same time the sweep of contemporary nationalism is creating new nations to be dealt with at the rate of a dozen or so a year. Language planning has become a Herculean task, but a necessary one: the spirit of "make do" and faith in our ability to improvise cannot be accepted as a substitute for a well-conceived training blueprint that allows sufficient lead time for the development of multiple language-area skills.

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