Campus Activism: Language Studies

A couple weeks ago, I took the bus to a friend’s college to visit for the day. On my way back, the bus driver was making fun of me for being late and we got into a nice conversation where he asked me about my studies. I told him I’m studying political science and he went “Oooooh! I don’t like politicians,” and then we had a good laugh and tangent conversation about this and his belief that all politicians are liars. After this, though, the conversation shifted to other things I’m studying — and that I’m minoring in Arabic and Spanish, and we started talking partially in Spanish. I was so honored by how happy he was that I was studying Spanish, and surprised by how his view of me studying political science seemed to get more positive. When I got off the bus, he gave me a huge smile and a high five, and said in Spanish something to the effect of “Good luck! Maybe I’ll see you someday!”

This year I decided to study two languages simultaneously — Arabic and Spanish — in spite of all the advice to NOT do this. I studied Spanish in high school (but I did not invest enough time in it), and I completed the first year of Arabic last year. I don’t recommend studying two languages at once unless languages come easily to you. They do not come easily to me, and I find myself on multiple occasions confused and speaking the wrong language in my classes. I don’t regret taking them both, but it’s definitely harder than taking them at separate times. The more I learn, the more these languages fascinate me in their beauty and complexity. Today I learned four different words for “pink” in Arabic, two of which translate to “flowery,” each referencing a different flower. Through my first year of Arabic — and through wonderful interactions with people like the one above — I solidified my belief that learning other languages should be required throughout education, and that it is the most basic (beautiful, essential) step to connecting with the world.

A large part of the importance of studying languages other than English, when English is your first language, is realizing a) the privilege gained in the world by being a native English speaker and b) the harm and prejudice in assuming that English is the most
important (and only necessary) language to know. The second point is a belief I didn’t know I had, and didn’t know why it was so wrong, until later when it was challenged in high school and continues to be challenged in college. Languages are so closely tied to a culture and identity, and English spreading through the world is a result of British imperialism, which is inherently linked to the suppression of indigenous culture. The more we respect other languages and move away from the mindset that someone should learn English to communicate with Americans, and more towards the attitude that Americans should learn language to communicate with others, the more respectful we are of the diversity in the world.

My roommate is an linguistics major, so I hear often enough about the merit of language studies and how awesome language studies are. I didn’t realize before talking to her that the UMass Amherst Linguistics Department is ranked number two worldwide, behind MIT, just surpassing Harvard this year (so take linguistics classes while you’re here!). If the basic ability to connect with someone else and another part of the world in an intimate way does not convince you to study languages, there are plenty of studies on how it benefits a person to know multiple languages. The American Center on the Teaching of Foreign Languages lists the positive impacts on cognitive skills and academic achievement of bilingualism. Among that list are positive impacts on memory and problem solving, and a correlation with the offset of Alzheimer’s. Research also shows that learning a language makes someone have a more positive attitude towards speakers of that language and the language in general. America is falling behind other countries in language studies and it’s going to be/is already a disadvantage. It will be a disadvantage in business, but also in general progression and mutual respect.

Part of my interest in languages is how the language teaches you about culture and history — Arabic is full of words that relate directly to the history of Islam, the Middle East, and North Africa. Imagine if learning languages was really emphasized in American schools. It’s not a stretch to think that it would help counter xenophobia and racism.

Extra Reading:

- This is an amazing TED Talk on how different languages impact how people view a situation (specifically the subjunctive)
- New York Times debate on “Is Learning a Language Other Than English Worthwhile?”
- American Center on the Teaching of Foreign Languages research on multilingual benefits
- Peace Corps article on the importance of learning another language
- “Twenty-five Reasons to Study Foreign Language” by a professor at Auburn University

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