

Bigelow

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WAR BRINGS LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES

Though Americans have come here from all the countries of the earth and speak most of the languages of the human race, this global war has strained our languages resources. Never have so many different, unusual and sometimes rare languages been needed. In the military, intelligence, informational communications fields during the war itself and in the peace to come languages are destined for a big part.

At the war's start not only was there a lack of Americans who speak these tongues but of teachers to instruct a small army of language recruits. Pearl Harbor found us tongue-tied in Japanese. One year earlier only about 50 men and women were studying Japanese seriously and, though the study of Japanese had been stepped up at the request of the combat services, there were too few individuals ready when the attack in the Pacific came.

In Chinese we were better prepared, particularly in Mandarin Chinese, the national language. Lacking, however, were experts in Chinese dialects. This is a serious handicap because it is these dialects which are largely used in Japanese broadcasts to the Chinese.

Malay and Thailand were the weakest spot on our Far Eastern language front. Mortimer Graves, administrative secretary of the American Council of Learned Societies, reports that at the start of the war only one American was known to have a good command of Thai or Siamese and not one was a recognized scholar in Malay or equipped to teach the tongue. Soon after the war began the National Resources Planning Board listed 41 persons who, as Mr. Graves puts it, were suspected of speaking Malay. But many of these spoke only kitchen Malay, that is, enough to buy a beer. Numerous others were noncitizens. Yale University is now teaching Malay, and Michigan Thai.

The vernaculars of India, such as Bengali, Punjabi and Hindustani, are as little known as Malay and Thai. So, too are almost all the languages of Central Asia, an area that is just as likely as India to prove an important theatre of the war.

The Near and Middle East also offers serious problems to our speech preparedness. Few persons realize that Turkish is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. At Indiana University an emergency Turkish course, where the students will study nothing else, has been assembled under the direction of Dr. C. F. Voeglin. In the present semester the course has a dozen students but in the next semester will accommodate 20 or 30.

In the Arabic languages Americans were prepared, but in one dialect, Moroccan, we were almost completely unversed. That gap is now beginning to be filled at the University of Pennsylvania.

In the European tongues, naturally, we are equipped, largely settled and continuously populated as America has been from Europe. We are short, however, in some Balkan languages.

So America moves on into a world of communications and intelligence completely different in character from anything we have known. As Mr. Graves puts it, in Asia Magazine, "whether we like it or not, we are in for a new era of mutual world-awareness in which our past methods of news gathering and international communications will be looked upon as thoroughly antediluvian."