

# **Bending the Arc of Our Nation's Languages: The Emergence of LCTLs in the United States**

**On**

## **The 25th Anniversary of NCOLCTL**

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The arc of a multilingual America is long, but it bends towards universal access.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has been characterized as “a graveyard for languages” (Rumbaut, 2009) in this country, as decades-long subjugation of non-English languages through educational, immigration, and government policies.<sup>1</sup> However, in the last two decades of that century, world events dealing with economic competitiveness and national security strengthened this nation’s growing awareness of languages, particularly the so-called LCTLs. Added to this was the decades-long struggle for recognizing and valuing the nation’s heritage languages, which helped broaden the concept of “less commonly taught language” and its attendant professional communities. Besides increasing LCTL awareness and visibility, these developments more importantly forged a coalescence or alliance among the languages that could no longer be ignored and that demanded a stronger voice in the national dialogue about the well-being of this nation. The mechanism of choice was a strong national organization able to guarantee LCTL visibility and voice as well as critical field-building support. Thus was born the NCOLCTL together with a number of constituent language- or area-specific organizations, all of which dared to represent the “less commonly taught,” or more appropriately the “under-resourced,” languages of this country. This reinforced sobriquet of “LCTLs,” together with the newly founded umbrella organization, had a remarkably successful and immediate impact: competitive, if not equal, recognition with the so-called “commonly taught languages” and two

decades of development and strengthening of the field architecture of the LCTLs. For example, in its 25 years of its existence, “Nickel Tickle” (a term I have never embraced, preferring “The Council”):

- Created a strong identity and unified the LCTL field in the United States;
- Established itself as the principal national voice for the LCTLs in the educational field and among federal agencies;
- Helped organize individual LCTL fields and assisted in founding national language-specific organizations, including those for African, Central Asian, Middle Eastern, Chinese (Cantonese), and South East Asian languages;
- Defined common problems and organized collective solutions among the LCTLs, including field-wide “language learning frameworks” to guide the development of curricula, materials, and teacher training;
- Developed a national communication and resource sharing system for the LCTLs;
- Influenced federal legislation, particularly Title VI of the Higher Education Act and subsequent legislation<sup>1</sup>, to support the LCTLs, particularly by helping to bring about the addition of field-focused and heritage community-focused USED NLRCs.
- Established a national community of teachers of the LCTLs.
- Continued efforts of annual conferences and assemblies, teacher training, research, data collection, a journal & newsletter, as well as organization-building support.<sup>ii</sup>
- Launched just recently, the “7000 Languages” project, in partnership with Transparent Language, LLC, constituting another bold effort to *make available to everyone who wants it instruction in any and all languages.*

These efforts together with the broad effects of globalization have made the division of LCTL and CTL, which was so inescapable two decades ago, less realistic and useful, as multilingualism and immigration have seriously disturbed the simplistic distinction of

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. the National Security Education Act

Commonly Taught and Less Commonly Taught languages. More to the point, we are now witnessing a new energy on behalf of *all* languages in the U.S., the signs of which are clear: an emerging rationale for language at the societal and individual level; popular attitudinal shifts and grassroots language learning opportunities; revolutionary advances in scientific research and communication & informational technologies (CIT) applied to language learning and use; clear promotion of language by organizations, businesses and academics; proven supply of language-enabled school graduates and global professionals; and, rising demand across society for language skills.<sup>iii</sup>

These developments as well as the reactions to them, I would argue, demand a transformation in the way we think and the way we talk about America's languages. In my view, it is not "foreign languages," or "world languages," or "Native American languages," or "heritage languages," or "commonly or uncommonly taught" languages. Rather, after decades of suppression, neglect, paternalism and indifference, important social changes here and around the world have begun to sharpen the concept of "America's Languages," and the transformation in mindset and rhetoric that it entails.

The phrase "America's Languages" is meant to capture the whole panoply of languages in this country that now instantiate the growing bilingual nature of this society. It is meant to emphasize a national, natural resource that is vital in dealing with dramatic social changes that now concern, if not frighten, us, including ethnic conflict, terrorism, environmental degradation, and global health issues. In addition to these negative concerns, recent social changes have brought more positive incentives for bending the curve of languages in this country to more recognition, acceptance and access. For instance, the Internet and communication and information technology (CIT) make possible virtually unlimited interactions and educational access, as least for democratic societies like our own. Who can deny that "Globalization," with all its free movement of people, goods and information, together with the evolving social, political and economic climate has changed America's understanding

of its place in this world? All these social and technological changes entail language—and by language I mean all of “America’s Languages.”

I have alluded to Joshua Fishman’s classification of this country’s languages to include its indigenous, colonial, immigrant, to which I have added “world” (the many other language not included in these three that are being studied by groups and individuals in this country). *These are all America’s languages; all are part of the rich heritage of this country.* And now these languages stand as the national resource that the academic, government, industry, heritage, and NGO sectors demand and supply. In this regard, the concept of America’s Languages is meant to remind us of our past and encourage us forward into our future. They are the focal point for a collaborative and cohesive alliance of stake-holders in all these languages and sectors acting to make national multilingualism and individual bi- and even trilingualism a recognized and valued aspect of our society and culture.

Such a collaborative and cohesive effort has begun under the banner of “The “Language Enterprise,” an alliance that is working towards a common vision, message and action plan for making a second language available to every resident of this nation. This alliance is working with the new AAAS effort, the Commission on Languages, and ACTFL’s “Lead with Languages” campaign, all three together representing a cohesive effort at a unique moment in the history of language in this country.

This, its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, presents an opportunity for the Council to reach out and to join hands with these efforts and this country’s full range of language organizations and sectors. This is entirely appropriate, given the fact that the NCOLCTL is alone in serving at least in theory all of America’s languages, with the exception of a few Post-colonial friends: English, French, German and Spanish. It is our goal is to make any and all languages available to each and every learner in this country who wants the advantage of a second or third

language. Our society is more and more becoming like the rest of the world in being culturally and linguistically diverse, and it needs the leadership and collaboration of this organization to speed this transition into a truly 21<sup>st</sup> century global society. The mission continues, and the dedicated people in this room have a tradition to uphold. After 25 years of building the LCTL fields, the NCOLCTL is positioned to take its place as one of the leading organizations supporting all of “America’s Languages,” for the sake of each and for the benefit of all.

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<sup>i</sup> Paper presented at the  
Macías Reynaldo F. 2014. “Benefits of Bilingualism: In the Eye of the Beholder?” In Callalhan & Gádara 2014

<sup>ii</sup> There are at present a total of eighteen member organizations of the Council (see Appendix F for a listing of officers, member organizations and their current representatives to the Council).

<sup>iii</sup> This being said, there are attitudes abroad in the country that elicit responses like Ferdman’s “Americans are beginning to lose their love for foreign languages” and Breslin’s America’s Distrust of Foreign Languages.”<sup>iii</sup>