

## A Double-edged Sword

**“Americans who travel abroad for the first time are often shocked to discover that, despite all the progress that has been made in the last 30 years, many foreign people still speak in foreign languages.”**

—Dave Barry

**W** E IN THE UNITED STATES often have a very strange relationship with the many languages of the world. English has become such a ubiquitous language in the hard sciences, commerce, aviation, and multiple other fields that many Americans have come to expect that communication in English will be available to them wherever they go. This proved to be an advantage for many U.S. businesses in their international dealings in the latter half of the twentieth century; the U.S. economy was so dominant that everyone wanted to do business with them and were willing to accommodate an English-only environment. But, like the proverbial double-edged sword, the dominance of English cuts both ways.

U.S. businesses are now often find-

ing themselves at a disadvantage in the globalized economy of the twenty-first century. Although the United States still has the largest economy in the world others, like China, India, and Brazil are closing the gap. When U.S. businesspeople go abroad, they can find themselves at a significant disadvantage in competing with multilingual challengers from companies based in places like Europe where multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception. A Parisian who also speaks Portuguese can have a much better rapport with local suppliers in São Paulo than a New Yorker who speaks only English.

Our cover story by Janet Hulstrand examines the recent growth of language study in U.S. higher education, especially in business-related specialties.

In a related column, Philip Altbach of Boston College writes about

what he calls “The Imperial Tongue: English as the Dominating Academic Language.” Altbach notes that due to the sheer size and wealth of the English-speaking world in the twentieth century, and the concomitant dominance of the universities in this portion of the world, the international academy has become increasingly slanted toward English as the language of research. In many countries, he notes, most all top-flight research is no longer published in the language of the homeland, but in English. Altbach notes, that this has had some advantages, as it has made research more accessible to scholars across the globe. But, Altbach argues, this hegemony may be at the cost of contributing to decreasing diversity of themes and methodologies that would otherwise enrich the world’s knowledge. **IE**

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