Transcultural and Transdisciplinary Approaches: A European View

Hans Lauge Hansen

IN DENMARK, traditional foreign language studies at the universities is going through a slump. Several middle-range universities have closed minor language studies for economic reasons (French and Italian), and even German and Spanish have difficulties in attracting a sufficient number of students at the largest universities, such as the University of Copenhagen and the University of Aarhus. For decades, foreign language studies at the higher education level in Denmark has been divided between foreign language studies at the universities, which has basically followed the traditional philological model, and foreign language studies located at business schools, which has had a more practical approach, based on commercial translation and technical language. Some eight or nine years ago, the business schools launched a new kind of foreign language studies program that focused on topics traditionally treated in the humanities, like language and communication or language and European studies, and they had enormous success. In one or two years the business schools attracted half or even two-thirds of the new students that formerly would have gone to the university foreign language departments. This loss left the university departments in a crisis that they have still not fully overcome. If we add to this crisis that, on the one hand, national politicians and decision makers do not recognize the time and resources necessary for language acquisition purposes and that funding for foreign language studies is therefore insufficient and, on the other hand, that many faculty members at the foreign language departments are reluctant to change, we have a more or less accurate picture of the situation of foreign language studies in Denmark.

In this essay I refer to the conclusions from the Changing Philologies conference organized by the Danish Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities in 2002 and from the Language and Culture Network that I presided over between 2002 and 2005. I finally specify how my view of the situation has changed since 2002.

Comment on the MLA Report

The MLA report “Foreign Languages and Higher Education,” published in April 2007, calls for a curriculum reform of traditional foreign language studies. The overall goal of this reform is to create candidates with translingual and transcultural competences by introducing “a broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture and literature are taught as a continuous whole, supported by alliances with other departments and expressed through interdisciplinary courses” (MLA Ad Hoc Committee). Moreover, the new curriculum should “incorporate the study of all kinds of material in addition to the strictly literary, and promote a wide cultural understanding through research and teaching.” I could not agree more, and
I think it marvelous that MLA has the courage to raise the question on a national agenda. The fundamental challenge for foreign language studies in the age of globalization is probably the same in all modern countries, and the objectives are similar, even if there are differences in the points of departure.

The point of departure for the MLA report is the language crisis that emerged in the States when the nation's language deficit became evident after 9/11, given the shortage of qualified, trained teachers in critical languages such as Arabic and Chinese. As the report states, “In the context of globalization and in the post-9/11 environment, then, the usefulness of studying languages other than English is no longer contested.” In Denmark and in other European nation-states, this type of awareness has not yet evolved as clearly as in the United States, but I think that in a few years it will.

The question that the MLA report sets out to discuss is, however, how to meet the challenge of adjusting foreign language studies when these new opportunities arise, and two competing views of language are described as part of this challenge. According to the first view, language is an instrumental skill to be used for communication purposes; according to the second, language is an integrated part of human thought processes and cultural identity, and as such it has to be at the core of translingual and transcultural competences. Not surprisingly, national defense and security agendas tend toward an instrumentalist view of language, whereas university language departments tend to see language as an integrated part of culture and history. According to the report, the problem is that both the instrumentalist language-school model and the standard configuration of university foreign language curricula are too narrow to meet the need for the development of translingual and transcultural competences.

I find the description of these two competing views of language valid and imagine that they constitute a global phenomenon. But of course this is a simplification. It is probably more correct to speak about many views of language: besides the instrumentalist view, there are different and competing theoretical conceptualizations of language: the cognitive view, the structuralist or generative view, the functionalist or pragmatic view, and so on. The instrumentalist understanding of language is probably one of the major reasons why politicians and decision makers fail to see the importance of research-based foreign language studies in higher education. The development of translingual and transcultural competences in university education requires sufficient funding, but national governments are reluctant to provide it. But as the MLA report underscores, funding is not enough; changes in foreign language curricula are also required, and I am afraid that not all theoretical approaches to language studies are equally fit to carry them through.

According to the MLA report, the problem with the teaching of foreign language in United States universities is the division between language and literature curricula and between the different kinds of positions that staff members hold. Whereas literature professors hold tenure-track positions, foreign language instructors often work outside departmental power structures, and there is no or very little cooperation between the two kinds of employees. In Denmark and probably in all Europe, we have the same division between the disciplines, but the division of labor is different. In Denmark, professors with tenure-track positions in foreign language departments
are engaged in three or four different branches or disciplines: research and teaching in linguistics and language proficiency; literature; and a complex combination of cultural studies, history, and sociological approaches. Each of these three disciplines accounts for a third of tenure-track positions. The amount of resources set aside for language proficiency depends on the initial level of proficiency of the students. In language programs like French, Italian, and Spanish, more resources for proficiency development are typically allotted than in German or English programs. The typical proficiency professor will be either a native lecturer hired full-time on a three- or four-year contract or a native speaker living in Denmark and teaching part-time.

The lack of collaboration between disciplines is nevertheless still a great problem in Denmark. As I argued in Disciplines and Interdisciplinarity in Foreign Language Studies, the formerly unified object of the philological enterprise was divided into general linguistics, comparative literature, history, and anthropology because philology lost its position as a scientific paradigm governing the organization of the humanities in the early twentieth century. The center of theoretical innovation was displaced from philological departments to comparative disciplines, and although no other scientific paradigm took over philology’s position as a unifying principle capable of holding together the various aspects of foreign language studies, the overall character of these departments did not change substantially for many years. But the unity of the philological quest, relying for almost a century on the existence of a Volksgeist as the core of national culture, came under pressure, and foreign language studies disintegrated into a series of independent disciplines, guided in their curriculum and methodology by comparative methods. What we with Claire Kramsch could call “the mediating function of language in the social construction of culture” was lost sight of (7). Therefore our conclusion in Changing Philologies was similar to the one quoted from the MLA report concerning the importance of elaborating a curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole (see Hansen, Changing Philologies).

European Initiatives

Unlike the United States, the European Union (EU) was created as a multilingual society: the official languages of the member states are official EU languages. Currently, the European Union has twenty-seven member states and twenty-three official languages. The notion of an EU lingua franca was rejected, and the EU adopted the principle of multilingualism as an official strategy. The languages are chosen by the national governments, and each member state decides which language or languages should be declared official languages of the EU. Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union in 2000 states that the union shall respect linguistic diversity, and article 21 prohibits discrimination based on a number of grounds, including language. This principle applies not only to the twenty-three official languages of the union but also to the many regional and minority languages spoken by segments of its population.

But the linguistic landscape of the union and of Europe as a whole has changed dramatically during the last ten to fifteen years, and it continues to change. The
number of official EU languages more than doubled between 1995 and 2007, and regional and minority languages have experienced a remarkable revival. This situation puts the union under pressure, and in November 2005 the European Commission approved the New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism and for the first time included the term multilingualism in the portfolio of an EU commissioner when Ján Figel became responsible for education, training, culture, and multilingualism (see New Framework Strategy).

**EU Framework Strategy for Multilingualism**

The new strategy is based on the fact that apart from its twenty-three official languages, the European Union has around sixty indigenous languages. Language is considered the most direct expression of culture; it is what gives each person a sense of identity. Therefore, linguistic diversity is seen as a resource rather than an obstacle. The EU is not to be understood as a melting pot in which differences are rendered down but rather a common home in which diversity is celebrated.

The decision of President José Manuel Barroso to make multilingualism part of the portfolio of one of the commission members and to assign him responsibility for multilingualism in education, culture, interpretation, translation, and publications announced a second step forward for the strategy for multilingualism. This step was confirmed by a conference held 15 February 2008. The High Level Group on Multilingualism presented its final report, in which it was announced that a more comprehensive language policy would be published in 2008. The new strategy includes both a management aspect and a political aspect related to, among other things, cultural identity and migration issues (see High Level Group).

The New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism is an ambitious program, but it suffers from some of the same diseases as the European Union itself. The union spends a lot of money on translation, yet communication across languages is not always perfect. Furthermore, a language like Catalan paradoxically does not count as an official language, although it is spoken by around 10 million citizens, mainly citizens of the Spanish state but also by Italians and the French. Although the framework strategy strongly recommends promoting the learning of the official EU languages, each member state is responsible for its own national education policy, including language teaching. Therefore, people involved in language teaching face the same problems everywhere in Europe. Because of the concept of language as instrument (discussed in the MLA report) and the widely held faith in English as the lingua franca of globalization, national politicians and decision makers still do not recognize foreign language skills as a professional competence. Fluency in English is considered a prerequisite in Denmark, and some even argue that English should be considered not a foreign language but rather a second language. German is an important language for economic reasons. Other foreign languages, such as the Romance languages, are considered relatively superfluous. Consequently, language learning in higher education is not as widely acknowledged as it is at the secondary level, and foreign language studies is short of funding almost everywhere in higher education.
ENLU and the Nancy Declaration

ENLU, the European Network for the Promotion of Language Learning among All Undergraduates, was selected by the EU Commission in preparation of the action plan Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity in 2003 (see ENLU). The main objective of the two-year project was to create a trans-European network of higher education institutions and other stakeholder organizations with a view to achieving a breakthrough in the area of languages for all. The project represents a response to the linguistic and cultural challenges posed by the creation of a European higher education area and European research area and by the Lisbon Strategy. The closing conference of the ENLU project was attended by some two hundred representatives of the European higher education languages community and other stakeholders and celebrated in Nancy in France on 7 and 8 April 2006. The principal outcomes of the conference are set forth in the Nancy Declaration (see Nancy Declaration). Moreover, it was decided to promote a more permanent network to produce a higher education language policy.

The Nancy Declaration, with the subtitle “Multilingual Universities for a Multilingual Europe Open to the World,” launched in 2006, advocated that all graduates in Europe should:

- be able to communicate in at least two languages other than their first language
- know how to improve their proficiency in languages
- have the confidence to learn a language when the need or opportunity arises
- have firsthand experience in working in and collaborating with other countries, and
- be familiar with other cultures and have intercultural skills

The report concluded that because the linguistic situation differs widely across Europe, it is not advisable to have a single model for a language policy. Still, the report recommended the enhancement of languages-for-all-undergraduates programs and underscored the importance of language policies to further such programs. To my knowledge, this enhancement has not yet taken place in any of the EU member countries.

The European Language Council and the Thematic Network Projects in the Area of Languages

Another important institution in the development of EU language policy is the European Language Council. The council was founded in 1997, when the thematic network programs were launched, and it has played a role in the development of research and EU policy making. The director of the council is Wolfgang Mackiewicz, a professor of English philology at Freie Universität in Berlin. The results from the second Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages on the role of languages in higher education institutions is available on the Internet (Outcomes).

In its recommendations, the second report distinguishes between traditional and alternative language programs. According to the report, traditional language programs focus on language, language history, or literature, often known as philology,
while alternative programs combine language-related studies with one or more other disciplines in roughly equal proportions. This distinction is analogous to the difference, mentioned above, between foreign language studies at the universities and the new composite foreign language programs at business schools in Denmark.

The Thematic Network Project Committee recommends the following changes in the area of traditional language programs (Projects):

The lack of variety in program types needs to be addressed by

- including new objects of study, such as film
- covering a wider range of languages, including less taught ones
- addressing skills relevant to students’ future careers
- increasing curriculum flexibility
- increasing innovation in methods of delivery

The European dimension of languages should be developed by studying languages in the context of plurilingualism and linguistic policies.

Greater interdisciplinarity is needed among language, literature, and social-cultural strands to improve coherence in the language programs.

More cooperation is needed between faculties and departments and among countries (e.g., recognition of awards), and more exchange of students and teachers is needed.

There should be international recognition of qualifications and more a robust system of credit accumulation and transfer.

Greater contextualization is needed in

- work experience and placement
- links with schools

For alternative programs, the committee recommends:

Awareness should be raised and the status improved of alternative programs by development of a stronger research base for languages for specific purposes.

Cooperation between alternative and traditional programs should be firmly anchored in institutions, and cooperation should be increased between institutions and external partners.

The number of languages studied and the competence levels required need discussion; objectives need to be more sharply focused, and assessment criteria need to be standardized.

There should be development of materials for alternative language programs.

Potential career paths of students should be identified and curricula adapted to prepare students for entry into the new language-related careers.

The committee recommends that the following measures be taken to address the needs identified:

Work should be done to improve the quality of alternative programs and to publicize good programs. Infrastructure should be established at all levels for the exchange of ideas and the dissemination of good practice, and pilot curriculum development projects should be created.
There should be a generalist program aimed at securing an adequate standard of linguistic competence at degree level 1. At degree level 2, there should be more courses in which language and content are integrated and specialization aimed at particular career outcomes.

There should be research on graduate career destinations and development of new programs addressing new careers. Existing provision should be focused in a more targeted way.

One would expect the recommendations from the Thematic Network Project Committee and the Nancy Declaration to have some effect, but so far we have not seen any political initiatives in that direction from the national governments, at least not in Denmark. If I nevertheless insist on maintaining an optimistic view of the future, is it because other stakeholders with other arguments are beginning to appear.

The ELAN Report

In 2006, the British National Centre for Languages (CILT, Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research), in collaboration with an international team of researchers, published the ELAN (Education Language) report on the effects on the European Union economy of the shortage of foreign language skills in private enterprise (“Effects”). The report had been contracted by the European Commission Directorate General for Education and Culture. The motivation for the study arose from the EU Commission’s Lisbon Strategy (2000) to stimulate economic growth and employment and make Europe’s economy the most competitive in the world. Language skills had been identified as a key factor in achieving this goal, and the objective of the study was to provide the commission and decision makers in member states with practical information and analysis of the use of language skills by small and medium enterprises and the impact on business performance.

The key findings of the report are:

Business is being lost to European enterprise because of the lack of language skills. On the basis of the study, it is estimated that 11% of exporting European small and medium enterprises (some 945,000 companies) are losing business because of communication barriers.

A clear link exists between language skills and export success. Four elements of language management were found to be associated with successful export performance: having a language strategy, appointing native speakers, recruiting staff members with language skills, and using translators and interpreters. The whole EU economy could gain if all exporting small and medium enterprises employed these techniques.

Although English is a major language for gaining access to export markets, the picture is not monolithic: Russian is extensively used in Eastern Europe as a lingua franca (along with German and Polish), French is used to trade in areas of Africa, and Spanish is used similarly in Latin America. Longer-term business partnerships depend on relationship building and relationship
management. To achieve such partnership, cultural and linguistic knowledge of the target country are essential.

In Denmark, the results of the ELAN Report have been used by organizations like the Confederation of Danish Industries and the Danish Chamber of Commerce to call for improving foreign language competences in the Danish population. The Confederation of Danish Industries even sponsored a research project at the Copenhagen Business School that confirms the results of the ELAN Report in a local Danish context (Verstraete-Hansen).

The economic argument is one that governments do understand. Economic and political globalization processes obviously create the need for better foreign language skills and better intercultural understanding. The European Union seems much more progressive than the governments of the individual member states on topics such as the social need for foreign language skills and for language policy. Recent developments in the United States and the increased awareness of the wide range of problems related to the lack of cultural understanding in modern societies may indicate a future change of attitude in European countries like Denmark as well. But it would be naive to expect this development to be automatic and even more naive to think that traditional foreign language studies, with its focus on grammar and literature, is a sufficient response to the challenges posed by globalization.

A Transcultural and Transdisciplinary Strategy for Foreign Language Studies

In December 2007, the Institute of Language, Literature and Culture at the University of Aarhus in Denmark (SLK, Institut for Sprog, Litteratur og Kultur), launched a new strategy that tries to balance, on the one hand, the maintenance and development of existing areas of research and, on the other, the development of cross-cutting, interdisciplinary collaboration. Furthermore, the strategy points to a special challenge related to the discussion of the social relevance of research in the humanities:

The institute wishes to give high priority to interdepartmental and interdisciplinary projects capable of applying linguistic, literary and historical/cultural insights to current social problems. For instance, this could involve areas such as the relationship between language acquisition and cultural understanding, or the relationship between languages and culture in trans-cultural and inter-cultural relations. (Strategy)

In the part of the strategy dedicated to education, the institute proposes to give priority to the creation of a new line of international and transcultural studies alongside existing study programs:

The institute's goals within a three-year period are to . . . establish a strong profile for the institute that combines the study of the languages, literatures and cultures represented at the institute with an international and trans-cultural line of studies.

It is obvious that I, as head of the department, have had a significant influence on the institute's strategic decisions over the last three years, and it remains to be seen if SLK will continue the transcultural and transdisciplinary strategy when I leave the position in the summer of 2009.
Fulfilling the SLK strategy will help achieve the goals set by the Changing Philologies conference in 2002. This kind of interdisciplinary project, capable of applying linguistic, literary, and historical-cultural insights to current social problems, is necessary for foreign language studies to engage in the challenge of placing language studies and foreign language competences at the center of future collaboration among different interacting knowledge regimes and global society. According to Ottmar Ette, a German professor of Romance languages and literatures, the transdisciplinary organization of research is a new way of conceptualizing science and knowledge transfer, and it is in step with emergent trends toward hypercomplexity and specialization in late modernity (47–50). Given the need for global knowledge transfer in the global knowledge economy, foreign language studies can play a decisive role in developing collaboration across the traditional gaps between the natural sciences and the humanities and between general and applied research.

In September 2007, a colleague from the Spanish department at the University of Aarhus and I called for the creation of a transdisciplinary Latin American research center. Two or three years ago, SLK housed the Centre for Latin American Studies, which was small, more traditional, and produced a journal on interdisciplinary collaboration between the humanities and social sciences, Diálogos latinoamericanos. Because of cutbacks in staff, this center was shut down. We wanted it to reappear as a center for transdisciplinary research among all the branches of knowledge production at the university. LACUA (Latin American Center, University of Aarhus) was an immediate success, in that researchers from many disciplines responded positively to the call: health sciences, environmental sciences, agricultural sciences, law, and economics. These scientists joined linguists, literary critics, anthropologists, and social scientists to establish a series of themes that could serve as the backbone of the center’s research profile:

- natural resource management, land use management, and land rights in modern Latin America
- citizenship, states, and social movements in Latin America
- modernization processes and conceptualizations of Latin American identity
- education and intercultural competences in Latin America: learning, language, and communication in a globalized world
- environmental sustainability, economic growth, trade, and global marketing

(Latin American Center (“Research Themes”))

Many of the twenty-five researchers participating in the center hold research grants, some of them major European grants, but all the projects are focused on areas like biodiversity among palms in Latin America, the health or environmental effects of the cultivation of specific plants in Latin America (e.g., stevia, amaranth), the possibility of calculating the effects of climate heating in Denmark by making comparative studies of freshwater lakes and rivers in Latin America and Denmark, and the creative strategies among socially marginalized children in Latin America. The center provides the opportunity for ongoing dialogue about the implementation of these projects. Although hardly anybody from the center would be able to teach the research team from environmental sciences anything about lakes and rivers, the
environmentalists cannot approach the question of implementing a strategy in Latin America to use the land surrounding the lakes and rivers, cannot deal with the political decisions involved in the implementation, cannot address the question of land rights and how the indigenous population relates to the modernization processes, and cannot know how the different parties involved express themselves on the issues. Precisely because the scientists are entirely aware of their limitations, the initiative to create the center has been met with enthusiasm and applause from research areas traditionally regarded as alien to the humanities.

LACUA was initiated as a research center, but I hope that soon it will be able to offer master’s- and PhD-level courses with a genuine transcultural and transdisciplinary profile, courses that engage students in project-oriented teamwork related to problems in the real world. Such courses will also serve as inspiration for our undergraduate students.

The center is now working to raise funds that will allow us to employ scientists who can engage in each of the five transdisciplinary research themes. Transdisciplinary research is not easy. Everybody, from politicians to business executives, praises it, but the research profile of LACUA is likely to create chaos in the discipline-oriented National Research Council. No single council is qualified to evaluate a project from any of LACUA’s five research themes, and the only known collaboration between the established research councils is bilateral collaboration between two of them. Even in a European context, our projects will create difficulties.

But despite the problems we have with fund-raising and gaining recognition of the center, LACUA represents the future for foreign language studies in at least two ways. First, it focuses on concrete social and political problems in an intercultural perspective and in this way turns area studies into transarea studies. Second, it goes beyond interdisciplinary collaboration among different branches of the humanities and opens up an approach that creates a bridge between the humanities and the sciences.

If foreign language studies is to meet the challenges of the global knowledge society, we must engage in the world’s most important social and environmental problems and play a role in the transcultural communication necessary to solve these problems. Our research topics may seem rather alien to the traditional fields of the humanities, but combining language skills with transcultural competences will allow foreign language studies to help link different disciplines together in a genuinely transdisciplinary approach to the object of study. In this way we can revitalize foreign language skills and transcultural competences as the knowledge hardware necessary for the successful operation of the global knowledge society.

Works Cited


Transcultural and Transdisciplinary Approaches: A European View

Hans Lauge Hansen


Projects We Are Currently Involved in or Supporting across the UK. Subject Centre for Langs., Linguistics and Area Studies, n.d. Web. 28 Feb. 2009.
