

# Speaking Their Language

By Carol Baskin

**"AMERICA IS THE ONLY COUNTRY** in the world where a student can go from the first grade through a PhD program and never have to study a foreign language," says Howard Mancing, a professor of Spanish at Mizzou. He's not proud of that fact.

Neither is President Jimmy Carter's Commission of Foreign Languages and International Studies. A year ago its report noted: "The United States' incompetence in foreign languages is scandalous. . . . Nothing less is at issue than the nation's security."

At Mizzou, special efforts by the Romance Languages department have attracted more students, particularly in Spanish and French, and also in Italian and Portuguese. Several of the changes recognize the vastly broadened job opportunities open to graduates who are fluent in a foreign language. Business, government, journalism and agriculture are perhaps the most obvious. Salary and travel opportunities are excellent. And increasingly, there are jobs in the United States for which Spanish is helpful or essential.

"Many corporations realize how valuable a bright person with language proficiency can be," says Alain Swietlicki, assistant professor of Spanish at Mizzou. "They can teach him everything he needs to know about selling widgets in Argentina a lot easier than they can teach their own widget expert to be fluent in Spanish."

It should be noted that most PhDs from Mizzou do require foreign language study. Bread and butter for Romance Languages, of course, is the 13-hour foreign language requirement for a bachelor's degree in the College of Arts & Science and the School of Journalism. Even though Mizzou's total enrollment has been fairly static in the last few years, enrollment in the basic Spanish and French courses is up this semester. For example, nearly 700 undergraduates are taking Spanish I this

semester. Swietlicki, in charge of all elementary Spanish classes, says it's the highest enrollment since he came to the University in 1974.

Tom Harris, associate dean of Arts & Science, recalls a survey of alumni and student attitudes on language requirements, taken just before the division's requirement was boosted from 10 to 13 hours. Alumni who had left Mizzou 10 and five years earlier and current seniors were asked if the requirement was fair.

"I remember there were some shocked people when we got the results back," says Harris. "More than 60 percent of the alumni who had been gone 10 years said they had used their foreign language and said more study should be required. The five-year group agreed, though not as big a percentage. Only the seniors thought the requirement was already too much."

Today, Harris says student complaints about the requirement are negligible, although he knows students still transfer to another division to avoid foreign language. "Times change," he says, noting the lack of vision of at least 200 schools that dropped their language requirements in the 1970s.

**INTENSIVE SUMMER COURSES** in Spanish and French have been offered the past few years. The department also has campaigned to interest students in dual degrees or double majors, established a program for summer study at a Mexican university and introduced new "language in translation" courses (taught in English) that offer students access to specific areas of foreign culture.

Swietlicki also directs the intensive beginning Spanish program, offered last summer for the fourth year. Though many language departments elsewhere offer courses called "intensive," he says Mizzou's programs, both the Spanish and French, are much more so than most. An overall 3.0 grade

A language person can learn widgets easier than a widget person can learn language.

A highlight of the University of Veracruz's program is a visit to El Tajin, the Totonac tribe's ancient capital.



Vern Williamsen

point average is required, but Swietlicki considers motivation a more important factor. He weeds out two of every three applicants. Missouri businessmen and government employees as well as students and faculty from Mizzou and other schools have taken the course.

**SWIETLICKI CALLS IT** a "total immersion" experience and expects complete commitment from the students. Emphasizing fundamental skills and conversational proficiency, the class meets through the morning hours and then lunches together. Student/teacher ratio averages three to one.

"Lunch is mandatory and it's the highlight of the

day," says Swietlicki. He doesn't mean gastronomically, either. "It's like a sporting event," he says. "We spend the morning hours warming up, practicing. Lunch is the game, the race. That's when we put to use what we've learned so far."

In the afternoon instructors provide remedial assistance if needed, or specialized vocabulary study. For example, a University economics professor planning to lecture at a Mexican university for a semester took the course; an instructor used Spanish textbooks in economics to help him.

In 1978 Romance Languages made some curriculum changes designed to encourage students to pursue dual degrees (a degree in language from

the College of Arts & Science plus a degree from another Mizzou division) or double majors (both within Arts & Science.) Spanish professor Vern Williamsen advises the group, which has grown to about 30. Many more students are informally involved, taking less language than required for a major. Williamsen says his role is "to help any student trying to develop language ability to a marketable skill in conjunction with another degree or major," whether the student is formally in the program or not.

**GETTING IN ALL THE REQUIREMENTS** for a dual degree or double major can take lots of juggling and long-range planning, so Williamsen encourages students to come to him as early as possible.

Williamsen also shepherded Mizzou's young program at the University of Veracruz in Mexico through its first two summers, beginning in 1978. Each summer since, 25 to 30 students have spent eight weeks attending the university on Mexico's Gulf Coast, located 1,200 miles south of Kansas City. They study in Spanish and live in family homes, "and I guarantee if they want to make friends they come back speaking Spanish," says Williamsen. Freshmen through graduate students have gone; one semester of Spanish is a prerequisite.

Rachel Anderson, a dual degree student (Spanish and Journalism) went to Jalapa in the summer of 1979. Getting interested in Spanish was an accident that proved significant to her college career. "I was typical," she says. "I had to take language to get into J-School so I took Spanish. The second semester I had a teaching assistant, Caroll Young, and was she ever great! Then I heard about the dual degree program and decided this would be perfect, with the job market being so tight in journalism."

**THE SUMMER IN JALAPA** "turned those abstract grammar rules into a working language, a communications tool," says Anderson. "Spanish majors shouldn't think of graduating until they participate in the program. It helped me get over my fear of speaking Spanish." In a job she held last summer, there were many Spanish-speaking people. "I know I would never even attempt to communicate with them if I had not gone to Mexico."

Literature in translation courses are another

recent innovation. Sometimes scorned by academicians, such courses are justified by Romance Languages as a means to introduce important works and authors to students whose lack of foreign language knowledge would otherwise exclude them. Such courses obviously also help maintain the department's student credit totals.

"There's more to be gained from foreign language than language competency," says associate professor of French Donna Kuizenga. "The purpose of a university education as opposed to a trade school is to broaden students, so that, in addition to their specific career goals, they learn some aspects of another culture and its literature."

Kuizenga teaches "Contemporary French Women Writers," one of the literature in translation offerings. The young faculty member developed the course out of her own involvement in women's studies, and her course can be taken for credit in either department. Another cross-listed course (with film studies) is the popular 300-level class in French cinema taught by Allen Thiher, an associate professor of French.

A special master's program has been formed to capitalize on areas of expertise of several faculty members. One has been organized around the unique talents of Margaret Peden, whom former department chairman Mancing proudly calls "one of the two best translators of Spanish into English in the world today." Peden is known for her translation of *Terra Nostra*, a famous work by Mexico's Carlos Fuentes.

**TODAY, MIZZOU ALUMNI** are holding jobs with international mining companies in the Sun Belt, with federal agencies, in the travel industry, in community development programs for Spanish-speaking Americans, as international airline stewards, teachers in French-speaking Togo in West Africa, and information officers in the Foreign Service in Panama and the Philippines. One graduate landed a job as sales associate in a New York-based wine importing company. Other applicants had the same business skills, but she got the job because she alone had the right languages.

With the momentum that the new emphasis on Romance Languages is providing, Mizzou graduates are opening up their job skills to the world. □