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Language Panel Reflection

This week, several professors were kind enough to come talk to us about the languages that they either taught at Wesleyan or a language that they spoke independently. One of the issues discussed during the panel that interested me was the question of a language being considered "difficult" or "not difficult" to learn, specifically in relation to Chinese. Chinese gets a reputation for being hard to learn, in largely due to its character-based writing system and use of tones, which are features highly unfamiliar to native English speakers. However, the professor pointed out to us that Chinese lacks certain complex grammatical structures present in English, such as verb tenses and conjugations, that present major challenges to learners of other languages frequently considered to be "easier" such as Spanish and French. As a student learning those two languages, I wondered what constituted a language as more or less "difficult" than another- I've always considered French and Spanish to be "easy" because I don't have to expand my mind to understand new linguistic concepts not present in English, but I still have to devote a large amount of time to learning verb conjugations, for example. The US Foreign Service Institute has published a ranking of languages by "ease" for native English speakers, with its primary metric being an average of the class hours that it took for diplomats-in-training to reach "Professional Working Proficiency"on a test. However, does time needed to achieve a score on a test constitute "difficulty?" It seems that when the "ease" of language learning is discussed, we are referring more to how familiar or unfamiliar the features of the language are to us. Especially for students who are choosing languages based on interest rather than being required to do so for a professional purpose, this reputation of "difficulty" can dissuade students who may have

otherwise been interested from learning non-European languages. I can imagine that this could end up having the ultimate effect of decreasing the amount of students who would end up using foreign language to expand their worldviews and interpersonal connections beyond Eurocentricity- which, perhaps, results in this view of non-European languages as objectively "difficult" in the first place.