

¿Habla Ud. español o riqueza?

A few weeks ago, one of my first-year Spanish college students told me angrily how much she resented having to study Spanish “for all those immigrants from Latin America.” Unfortunately, she’s not alone in her resistance to learning a second language nor in her resentment of “immigrants.” American society has always been monolingual and xenophobic. That was, however, the first time I heard that resentment couched in terms of “learning as charity.”

Many people who used to believe that we were a homogeneous society are now facing, with great misgivings, the immigration of heterogeneous groups. They resent the new waves of immigrants, especially those from Asia and Latin America. Some want those new immigrants to at least integrate by forgetting their native tongue and their customs. In 1982, Senator Hayakawa founded the “English Only” movement, and his state, California, passed a law declaring English the official language. Sixteen other states, including Florida, with one of the largest Hispanic populations, have followed suit. The people who want to impose a single language talk of national unity and wanting the speakers of other languages to be fully integrated citizens who can partake of all the opportunities this country has to offer.

But the real reason for this linguaphobia lies in the “melting pot” concept of “Americanization.” “Melting pot,” the phrase coined by playwright Israel Zangwill in 1908 to describe America, has become the unfortunate emblem of an ethnocentric world view that considers everything American as superior and immigrants as a threat to that superiority.

In 1751, Benjamin Franklin said:

Why should the Palatine boors be suffered to swarm into our settlements, and, by herding together, establish their language and manners, to the exclusion of ours? Why should Pennsylvania, founded by English, become a colony of aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us, instead of our Anglifying them...?

If we substitute “Asians” and “Hispanics” for “Germans,” it becomes easier to understand the fear of anything foreign that still permeates American society today. People who advocate “English Only” are afraid of being latinized; they fear for their identity. In 1896, the Commissioner of the Common Schools of New York City said that the public schools had the duty to form American citizens by “obliterating” all their “distinguishing foreign characteristics and traits,” for these were “obstructive, warring, and irritating elements.”

The myth of the melting pot, which really meant “obliterating” the identities of the newcomers in order to “anglify” them is being examined and rejected by long-established as well as by newly-arrived minority groups. We are realizing that we don’t want to melt into a tasteless, textureless, colorless mush. We understand that our language and our culture are not “obstructive, warring, and irritating elements.” Rather, they are an integral part of our identity and represent riches to enjoy and share rather than excess baggage to shed. We think that a better metaphor for this multi-racial/ethnic/religious/cultural/lingual country is a paella, a curry, an empanada, or a salad.

On a more positive note, in Texas one can see bumper stickers that read:

“MONOLINGUALISM IS A CURABLE DISEASE.” In spite of the “English Only” movement, Los Angeles is the second largest Spanish-speaking city in the world after Mexico City. San

Antonio has been bilingual for 150 years. Southern Florida is also bilingual. By the middle of the next century, one out of every four people in this country will be of Hispanic origin, and almost half of the U.S. population will be Spanish-speaking. We will also be English-speaking. We will be Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Caribbean, Central, or South American and, at the same time, American. That is what being bilingual and bi-cultural means: the freedom to choose not either/or, but both.

It is unfortunate that my student thinks she is studying Spanish on behalf of immigrants, that learning Spanish is “charity.” I know we speak “richness.” Arturo Madrid, President of the Tomás Rivera Center in Claremont, California, said it best:

I become stronger, and my voice becomes more compelling, because I can draw on two different experiences, two different cultures, two ways of knowing and being. If I were to be denied one or the other, I do not think my voice would be as strong, and I would not feel as empowered.

Postdata

I wrote this in 1993, while I was teaching Spanish at the University of Pennsylvania. In the 24 years since, the world has changed, and the United States has changed even more. The immigrant population of this country is now larger and more diverse. This has naturally made America richer and more interesting. I welcome the choices we can now make in the type of cuisine we savor each evening. I admire the elegant, colorful, dresses some of our neighbors wear. I enjoy the sounds of the myriad languages I, unfortunately, don't understand because I speak only two and read only three, but they are still music to my ears. I am thankful that last Saturday I was given the opportunity to join in the celebration of the golden wedding anniversary of a lovely couple from India who are the grandparents of my grandson's best friend, and that I

was able to learn a little about their culture and to share in their joy. I am proud of the fact that this grandson tells the world that he is three-fourths Latino, 50% Puerto Rican, and 25% Mexican.

Today, Donald Trump, not my president, removed the Spanish option from the White House website, demonstrating once more his ignorance, his bigotry, his cruelty, his incompetence. We know he doesn't read, and he, obviously, has never heard of the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, or of his wise counsel:

Whatever you are is never enough. You must find a way to accept something, however small, from the other to make you whole and to save you from the mortal sin of righteousness and extremism
(Anthills of the Savannah).

Donald Trump does not accept anything from the other, from all the others he secretly fears and outwardly despises. He is, therefore, righteous, and an extremist. He is, therefore, not whole. He lacks the mirror neurons that make us capable of feeling the fear, the pain, the desperation, of our fellow human beings. He is incapable of sharing the pride and joy of others. His spirit is impoverished, and every day he is in the White House, he will try to impoverish the rest of us. We must fight against him while maintaining our dignity and compassion. We must work to remove him from office while being charitable about his mental and spiritual illnesses.