

# Introduction

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## THE VALUE OF DIVERSITY

Diversity is a natural phenomenon. It exists in animals, in plants, in topography. Biodiversity supports human survival; people around the world depend on it for food, shelter, and clothing, and much medical research is based on the curative powers of natural compounds. In specific environments, the balance between living organisms and certain physical factors regulates the climatic systems that provide clean air and water and needed oxygen. When this balance is thrown off, as happens when a species disappears, the environment and its remaining residents suffer. Biodiversity also enriches human lives esthetically. We enjoy seeing and learning about all forms of animal life, eagerly anticipate the blossoming of color in the spring, and value trips to places whose scenery differs from the places where we reside.

For these reasons, many of us express sorrow over those instances in which biodiversity is threatened. We hear of an animal about to become extinct and rally to its cause; we lament the loss of rain forests. However, threats to diversity are often generated by human needs, such as industrial development, living space, and food production. It is at these times that the course that is best taken for human survival is not at all clear.

Like biodiversity, linguistic diversity helps sustain human existence. At times, medicinal cures are found in plants and flowers native to a particular region; knowledge about these cures comes from natives speaking the local language. If the language disappears, the medical knowledge will disappear as well. Languages contain other types of knowledge; they express particular ways of viewing life. Natural phenomena are viewed differently, as are familial and social relations. A wealth of information about human survival and adaptation is embedded in the many languages of the world. Linguistic diversity offers writers a wide range of artistic expression. In

addition, research has shown that multilingual people have advantages over monolinguals in creative and divergent thinking, intelligence, and cognitive flexibility; investment in multilingualism thus means an investment in potential solutions to the problems humans face.

Just as biodiversity is threatened today, linguistic diversity is threatened as well. Of the roughly 6,000 languages that currently exist, half may be dead or dying by the year 2050. While the extinction of some languages is natural, language loss has accelerated in modern times. The same factors that are responsible for the loss of biodiversity, such as increased industrialization and population pressures, are responsible for diminished linguistic diversity. The global economy pushes small, non-industrialized communities to abandon local cultures and languages for participation in the larger world. The Internet, in particular, has introduced people far and wide to an enticing, globally-based source of knowledge that may compete with particular and local ways of seeing the world. Not surprisingly, there is a high correlation between biodiversity and linguistic diversity; in places where biodiversity is strong, linguistic diversity is also strong, and in places where biodiversity has been compromised, languages have been lost. In a similar way, a loss of linguistic diversity throws off the balance of life.

Whether the preservation or sacrifice of linguistic diversity best serves human survival is as difficult to answer as the same question regarding biodiversity. Linguistic diversity poses problems of communication. It may divide populations and pit them against each other in political struggles over rights and resources. However, because linguistic divisions often reflect other divisions by which society categorizes individuals, such as race, wealth, and power, different groups may see greater or lesser linguistic diversity as beneficial to their particular needs.

In some societies, the majority-language group attempts to maintain control over minority-language groups by suppressing their languages and imposing the majority language. In other societies, the majority-language group may foster minority languages and block those who speak them from learning the majority language for fear that it may help unite the groups and foster challenges to those in power. A minority-language group that gains control of a territory may limit the use of the majority language as a means of protecting its own language. In addition, minority-language communities and individuals within them may differ regarding the way they value linguistic diversity. Some may see the preservation of their languages as necessary for the preservation of their identity and heritage; others may see it as barring access to socioeconomic mobility in the larger world. As we will see, the particular characteristics of a minority-language group help determine the extent to which its language is maintained.

Social and historical change within a society add further complications to the issue of linguistic diversity. Such changes, with their concurrent

shifts in population and power distribution, may disturb what is thought to be the linguistic balance or status quo of the society. The United States is in the midst of such a transformation today. People of European ancestry, who have long assumed their right to status and power, are becoming a numerical minority, while the number of people of non-European ancestry increases. In the case of the United States, the cause of this shift is a significant transformation in the source of immigration.

In the past, major waves of immigrants coming from Europe were eventually assimilated with older residents, while non-Europeans faced more resistance. Today, the majority of newcomers are from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These immigrants are less easily drawn into mainstream American life than their European predecessors were. They are racially distinct from Europeans, which means they are likely to encounter the racial bigotry that is so endemic in American culture. Recent immigrants come from countries that have sometimes been plagued by years of economic distress and political strife, and that have often been dependent on various kinds of international assistance. After moving to the United States, these immigrants are often ill prepared to survive on their own, and many of them fall once again into a state of dependency. There is no longer the abundance of factory jobs which earlier immigrants relied on to support their families, and which required little knowledge of English. Great differences between the immigrants' own cultures and the American culture may make their adjustment even more difficult. In general, then, even though immigrants have never had an easy time of it, for these new immigrants the process of adapting to a new life, and of being accepted by established Americans, often presents obstacles that their European predecessors did not face. In addition, because of their non-European ancestry, their children and grandchildren may encounter similar obstacles to acceptance, even as these generations become Americanized.

Complicating this situation is an economic crisis. The American dream of upward socioeconomic mobility is dying; the middle class has to struggle just to stay where it is. As mainstream Americans lose their sense of security and well-being, they try to find ways to maintain the feeling of control that seems to be slipping away.

Some Americans have found what they believe to be a solution. They hang on to their sense of control by elevating the importance of their language, English, over the languages of minorities, and by insisting that it be the only language of communication. There is little they can do to change those who are different; they can't alter people's skin color or their facial features. Without being labeled racist, they can't prevent them from being hired for coveted jobs or from moving into their neighborhood. But they can try to control their language and culture.

In the process, society applies pressure on immigrants to discard the

visible and audible marks of their distinctiveness, their vital links to a foreign land and another life. The dignity and self-respect of these minorities diminish; the message that they are worth less than others comes through clearly. In addition, their access to American life is constrained; their ability to adjust to their new homeland is made more difficult. By debilitating those who have not mastered English, those who have spoken it from birth maintain their advantage. Language diversity is diminished in an attempt to preserve the status quo.

## **WHY THIS BOOK IS NEEDED**

Most Americans are not aware of the consequences of language restrictionism. The idea of declaring English as the official language seems to be a good one. Advocates for official English promise that it will bring greater unity and harmony to American life; no one wants to pass up a chance to improve human relations. They also claim that such a measure will help immigrants adjust to their new home; this humanitarian gesture is welcome. No one will be hurt by official English, they say; it can only help. The idea of improving life for everyone with this one, easy step has tremendous appeal.

Therein lies the need for this book. All of the above arguments for institutionalizing monolingualism are unsupportable. Making the government function in only one language will not bring greater harmony to American life, will not help immigrants adapt to a new society, and in fact will hurt many of the people it promises to help. One goal of this book is to examine the movement for English monolingualism in detail, to put all of its arguments under the microscope and reveal their inherent weaknesses. Another goal is to examine the antithesis of English monolingualism, language pluralism, to show how much it has already enriched American life, and to suggest the promise of a future in which language pluralism is nurtured instead of inhibited.

Support for language pluralism appears often in the media. But what has been missing until now is an extended discourse on the issue from the point of view of a linguist. In linguistics, and especially in the subfields of second-language acquisition and bilingualism, there exists a wealth of scholarly information which should be used to counter the rhetoric of language restrictionists. Unfortunately, American linguists do not have a tradition of sharing their work with the public; mostly, they speak to each other at professional conferences and through academic journals. Perhaps this is because the public has shown little interest in the work. Until recently, second-language learning has been of relatively little importance, and immigrant acquisition of English has not been considered a societal problem. However, with the demographic shifts described above, all matters relating

to immigrants have taken central stage in national politics. Linguistics has much to offer to the public discourse on language minorities and their adjustment to American life.

The results of linguistic research are especially important to this discourse in light of the nature of the opposition. The official-English camp is made up of people with a political ideology to maintain. Most of its leaders have little expertise in language learning or actual contact with major immigrant groups. Advocates of monolingualism have little science and scholarship on their side. The few educators and language experts on their side are willing to play havoc with the literature, distorting or lying about research results to support their political viewpoint. This makes objective, scholarly information all the more essential to the discussion.

This book therefore brings what linguists have learned about language acquisition to the issue of how the United States should deal with the language needs of its population. This information is written especially for the layperson. No expertise is needed to understand the concepts. Second-language learning is a common human process, and many of the readers have probably gone through it themselves. Hopefully, they will see their own experiences or the experiences of people they know reflected in the discussion of linguistic research.

A linguistic perspective on the place of languages in American society must intersect with the perspective of other disciplines. Learning a language does not take place in a vacuum. It happens to a particular group of people, in a particular community, at a particular place in time. This book does something that has not been done before. It draws together linguistic, sociological, and historical information for a multifaceted view of what language diversity means and what place it has in American society.

## THE GENESIS OF THE BOOK

Writers come to their subjects from various routes, some professional and some personal. In the case of this book, I am naturally influenced both by my professional and by my personal lives.

I am a professor of English at Hostos Community College of the City University of New York, in the heavily Hispanic neighborhood of the South Bronx. I am therefore intimately familiar with the obstacles that immigrants face in learning English and adjusting to American life. The competing demands of work, family, and study among adult immigrants are enormous, and the determination with which many face these demands is truly admirable. Above and beyond these pressures are a fierce attachment to their native language and culture and an unavoidable physical and psychological separation from mainstream American life, making the acquisition of English and an understanding of American culture even more difficult.

Most Americans do not realize the enormity of the task of changing one's life so completely; if they did, there might be greater compassion for immigrants in society in general and in the halls of state and federal capitols.

But my involvement with this issue – and perhaps my choice of profession – has a strong link to my personal history as well. I am a daughter of multilingual immigrants. Growing up in a small northern city of Italy, my parents learned Italian in school; Yiddish was their home language, and Hebrew the language of prayer. Being routed from Italy as young adults, they picked up other languages along the way. My mother's family lived in Palestine during the Second World War, and my mother became proficient in modern Hebrew. My father came to the United States to join the military; his stay in army camps in the South was his introduction to English. After the war, my parents settled in New York, where my father began an export business, making good use of his knowledge of languages.

I was constantly exposed to different languages during childhood. I did not acquire bilingualism naturally, but the sounds of Italian from my parents' conversations became very familiar, and I could eke out some expressions in Yiddish when conversing with my grandmother and other relatives of her generation. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, members of our family trickled in to the United States, staying with us for the months it took to adjust themselves and filling the house with the sounds of different languages. Business clients from Europe and Latin America often came to visit. When I started studying Spanish in school, I was fortunate to be able to practice the language with dinner guests; both my parents had acquired Spanish as well.

Looking back, I am amazed at my parents' self-taught linguistic proficiency. My father could converse and write word-perfect business letters in several languages. My mother finished the Sunday *New York Times* crossword puzzle every week and was a champion Scrabble player. We even had a Spanish-language Scrabble set. From my parents I learned the joy of reading and playing with words. I also acquired an appreciation of different languages, and of the people who speak them.

Having been the beneficiary of such a rich linguistic upbringing, I can only react to the wave of language restrictionism that has washed over the United States with the greatest dismay. It is difficult to imagine why society would deny children this kind of experience, if it can be so easily and naturally offered to them. When I first heard of a particular piece of legislation proposing that English be the preferred language of Americans, and calling on government to encourage its use among citizens, I could not help thinking how my parents would have reacted. I imagined someone coming to our house and informing them that they should speak only English; I then imagined my mother politely but firmly showing this individual to the door. If this happened to me today, I know I would do the same.

## THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book proceeds in a logical manner, with each chapter offering information that prepares the reader for the chapter to come. Chapter 1 begins with some basic concepts about the nature of language and the role it plays in identifying people and connecting them to each other. As symbols of nationality, languages have often been targeted for attack as a means of repressing people with low status. This explains the present language-restrictionist movement in the United States. The premises of this movement are presented and challenged.

A major theme of the language-restrictionist movement is the loss of what is known as the melting-pot tradition. In this vision of the nation, newcomers of every stripe willingly jump into a great cauldron; what emerges from this brew is a new kind of American, one who reflects some of the features of all the residents in the country. Chapter 2 shows this tradition to be an illusion. The melting-pot view of America is compared to other paradigms of immigrant adaptation; we discuss the place of all these paradigms in American history. A review of the history of immigrant languages reveals that Americans have always expected immigrants to replace whatever traits make them different with characteristics that make them appear more "American." Rather than becoming part of a prototype American, many immigrant characteristics, including language, have become extinct largely through coercion. The chapter also challenges two premises of the language-restrictionist movement: that language loss is inevitable and desirable, and that present-day immigrants resist the acquisition of English.

If this last premise is false, and immigrants truly do want to learn English, why is it so difficult, and why does it take so long for them to learn it? Most Americans are not experts in second-language learning; indeed, few of them acquire high-level proficiency in a second language. Chapter 3 dispels a number of myths about learning a second language, showing that the process is more complex and time-consuming than most people realize, and offering information about bilingual learning that they may not know.

With this basic knowledge of how language is learned, the reader will be ready to investigate the types of language education available to children in the United States. Chapter 4 analyzes instructional approaches for minority-language children learning English, for English-dominant children learning second languages, and for children of both groups learning both of their native languages together. This analysis includes assessments of these programs in the press, which reveal a clear double standard regarding language education in America: bilingualism for English-dominant children is valued, while bilingualism for minority-language children is discouraged.

The attitudes toward minority languages in American education are mirrored in the attitudes toward these languages in the larger society.



Chapter 5 delves into the modern language-restrictionist movement. A brief review of American language policy puts the present surge of language repression into historical perspective. The chapter then describes the social, political, and economic factors that have provided the optimal conditions for this resurgence. This is followed by an analysis of US English, the organization that has led the movement, and the present state and federal language-restrictionist legislation.

Chapter 6 describes the forces working against language restrictionism. This includes the official bilingualism of two states, resistance to official English in Puerto Rico, and the work of language-pluralist advocates across the nation. The only successful legal challenge to a state official-English law is described. The long tradition of workplace bilingualism is an additional challenge to language restrictionism. Two legal cases asserting the right of minority-language employees to speak a language other than English at work are discussed; their contrasting outcomes reveal the ambiguities of the law with regard to such claims.

Ambiguity is an apt description of what Americans feel about multilingualism. The language-restrictionist movement puts this ambiguity to good use by arguing that multilingualism is divisive. Proponents of the movement contend that the social and political problems of linguistically diverse nations are due to this diversity. Chapter 7 shows that language diversity in itself is not a cause of civil unrest. Rather, the imposition of a single official language and the repression of minority languages are indications of a class system that favors some people and disadvantages others. Several examples demonstrate this to be the case: official multilingualism in Canada and Switzerland, the revival of regional languages in Western Europe, and the struggle to perpetuate minority languages in India.

Chapter 8 brings the book to conclusion by asking one of the fundamental questions that the United States faces: how can a pluralistic, multilingual population live in mutual respect and harmony? This chapter imagines a society in which people cross racial and ethnic boundaries to come together around common interests. A necessary component of this society would be the fostering of universal bilingualism, so that people could connect with and learn from those who are different from them. The benefits of universal bilingualism would reach every level of the community, from individuals to the nation as a whole.

## **SOME NOTES ABOUT TERMINOLOGY**

When I first came up with the title for this book, I struggled over using the word “America.” I was acutely aware of the political implications of referring to the United States by this term; certainly, there is more to America than the United States. But using “the United States” for the title



didn't seem to work; "America" has a sense of poetry that the other term lacks. It is also the term closely associated with the immigrant experience; Roger Daniels titled his history of immigration *Coming to America*. Seeing that Daniels and other authors use "America" in their titles when referring to the United States, I decided to use it as well.

The same problem occurred during the writing of the book. "The United States" is an awkward adjective, so I opted for "American" as an adjective and "Americans" when referring to citizens of the United States. On this matter, I rely on the indulgence of residents of other nations on the American continents.

I also had to search for a way of identifying Americans whose native language is English. "Native-English-speaking Americans" was rather awkward. Other writers have used "European-American" and "Anglo-American" to refer to this category of Americans. I find these terms too exclusionary. I decided instead to use the terms "mainstream Americans" and "established Americans." These terms are a bit exclusionary also; there are Americans outside the mainstream and the establishment who are native speakers of English. But these terms come the closest to representing this category of Americans.

A note is in order about the terms "immigrants" and "language minorities." When I use the word "immigrants," I refer to those immigrants whose native language is not English; there are of course immigrants who are English-dominant. The immigrants to whom I refer are part of a larger group known as "language minorities." Language minorities include American-born people whose first language is not English. The children of immigrants who speak a language other than English may belong to this group, if their parents' language is used predominantly at home. Also included are Native Americans and Mexican Americans whose home and community languages are not English. Issues of language diversity and language restriction affect all of these people in the same way.

Choosing terms for ethno-racial groups has also been problematic. There has been some discussion about the appropriateness of using the terms "Latino" and "Hispanic." It is argued that Americans and immigrants with roots in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and in Central and South America have little connection to either Latin or to Spain, from which "Hispanic" is derived. However, there is no satisfactory alternative to these terms; I use them both. Also, two designations are often used to refer to people of African origin: "black" was the preferred term in the 1960s; now, "African American" is popular as well. Both terms are used here.