

# Heritage Languages: Tapping a 'Hidden' Resource

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In a rational world, the philosophy known as English Plus would put a quick end to campaigns for English Only. The logic is overwhelming: Why should any nation limit its horizons to a single language when the global economy rewards those who can accommodate diversity? Why choose isolation from other cultures in a time of change that brings dangers as well as opportunities? Why pass laws to repress "bilingualism," a resource that competitors are trying to conserve and exploit?

These questions are especially relevant for the United States, where generations of monolingual complacency have left us an underdeveloped country where language skills are concerned. Such ignorance fosters parochialism, which encourages intolerance, which breeds conflict and limits cooperation. It is a cycle that imperils our vital interests not only in trade and security abroad but, equally important, in democracy and race relations at home.

## English Plus

Fortunately, there is a solution close at hand. Immigrants are importing most of the world languages we need, free of charge. Native Americans, by struggling to keep their linguistic heritage alive, are preserving cultural treasures that would otherwise be lost. To make the most of such gifts, we merely need to encourage their development – especially among children. Naturally, our schools must ensure that all students achieve proficiency in the national language. But English is no longer enough. America needs English, *Plus* other languages.

All of this makes eminent good sense. The philosophy has been endorsed by editorial writers, state legislatures, members of Congress, and presidential candidates. It articulates a comprehensive, equitable, and humane language policy. And yet, it has done little to halt the march of language restrictionist legislation, which has now passed in more than 20 states and numerous localities. English Plus seems to appeal mainly to language educators, advocates of ethnic pluralism, and speakers of other languages – in other words, to the minority of Americans who already value bilingualism.

Of course, many others will grant the importance of learning foreign languages and will support efforts to teach them to English speakers. Yet seldom do they consider a more promising source of these skills: communities that maintain heritage languages other than English. Campbell and Lindholm (1987) report that, by the age of five, Korean immigrant children achieve higher proficiency in their native tongue than adult graduates of an intensive Korean-as-a-second-language program run by the U.S. military. Developing heritage language resources would be far more efficient, not to mention more economical, than trying to create them from scratch. Because this potential is unappreciated, however, it remains largely untapped.

### **Skills are being squandered**

In the 2000 Census, an estimated 14.6 million school-age children – more than one in four – lived in households where a non-English language was spoken. Largely because of immigration and the relative youth of minority language speakers (producing higher-than-average birthrates), this population is growing by about 40 percent per decade, a trend that shows no signs of slowing down. As a result, the United States is more linguistically diverse than at any time since the early 1900s. Many Americans who came of age between the 1920s and 1970s, an era of tight limits on immigration by non-English-speakers, find this change alarming. A new movement demands “the legal protection of English,” claiming there is now widespread “resistance” to learning “our common language” (U.S. English, 1987).

Demographic research shows that precisely the opposite is true. While the number of minority language speakers is rising, their rate of Anglicization is rising even faster. These groups are not only shifting to English as their usual language, but also losing their heritage languages more rapidly than ever in our history (Veltman, 1983).

Language shift is especially acute in Native American communities, where about one-third of indigenous tongues have disappeared since the coming of Columbus. Of those that survive, nine out of ten are classed as “moribund” – no longer spoken by children (Krauss, 1992). Even languages that were recently considered secure are showing signs of erosion. A generation ago, 95 percent of Navajo six-year-olds were monolingual in their ancestral tongue; by the early 1990s, less than a third started school fluent in Navajo (Holm, 1993). Similar shifts are evident among young speakers of Crow, Hualapai, Choctaw, and Tohono O’odham. At this rate virtually all Native American languages could be extinct within two or three generations.

### **Immigrant children prefer English**

Newcomer languages are being lost as well, notwithstanding the replenishing effects of immigration. In the most comprehensive study of this phenomenon to date, Portes and Hao (1998) surveyed first- and second-generation immigrant students in Miami and San Diego. They reported that 64 percent of 8th and 9th graders knew English “very well,” while only 16 percent knew the heritage language very well. An astounding 72 percent of these children said they preferred to use English.

The researchers noted that Mexicans, Cubans, and other Latin Americans were more likely than Asian immigrants to retain the heritage language, in part because they were more likely to be concentrated in schools and neighborhoods. Yet few reached full proficiency in the heritage language – even in majority-Hispanic communities. Another survey of high school graduates in Dade County, Florida, found that only 2 percent were fluent in both oral and written Spanish. As a local businesswoman complained: “The majority of the businesses in Miami require bilingual employees, and ... they don’t find them here. They go to Colombia and Venezuela” (Mears, 1998).

While the causes of language shift are numerous and complex, most prominent among

them is the power of English. Its hegemony in American economic and cultural life, along with its high social status, make it irresistible to younger generations. Conversely, the stigma of inferiority attached to minority tongues is often internalized by children who speak them (Tse, in press). In the Miami-San Diego survey, two-thirds of immigrant students said they preferred to use English as their dominant language (Portes and Hao, 1998). The researchers cited strong pressures on these children to assimilate, combined with few opportunities to develop heritage languages in school and limited respect for such skills outside ethnic families and communities.

Society's message to immigrants is implicit but unmistakable: knowing one language is better than knowing two. Is this truly the signal we want to send?

### **Why conserve heritage languages?**

As noted above, addressing unmet language needs is essential to the national interest in such areas as the economy, world affairs, and community relations. But the benefits do not end there. For individuals, they include:

- *Cognitive and academic growth.* Psychologists have found that bilingualism is correlated with greater mental flexibility, perhaps because command of two symbolic systems provides more than one way to approach a problem. To realize such advantages, however, it appears to be necessary to achieve substantial proficiency in both languages, or “balanced bilingualism” (Hakuta, 1986). Numerous studies have reported that, for limited-English-proficient (LEP) students, cultivating skills in the native tongue leads to superior academic achievement over the long term (e.g., Portes and Hao, 1998).
- *Help with identity conflicts.* Becoming proficient in the heritage language can assist young people struggling with ethnic ambivalence, or negative attitudes toward their own culture. It enables them not only to explore their roots and associate more closely with fellow speakers of the language, but also to overcome feelings of alienation with a sense of pride in their community. Biliteracy in particular has been associated with greater intellectual confidence and self-esteem (Tse, in press).
- *Family values.* Communication is crucial to family relationships. When immigrants are limited in English, they must rely entirely on the heritage language to pass on values, advice, and traditions to their children. Yet many immigrant youth tend to rely primarily on English, losing skills in their parents' or grandparents' only medium of expression. In such cases, neither generation can make itself understood. Language loss creates barriers within families that produce tension, conflict, and sometimes violence (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Cho & Krashen, 1998). By contrast, children who become fluent bilinguals not only tend to remain closer to their elders but often provide essential services as “language brokers,” helping them negotiate tricky situations in English (Gold, 1999).
- *Career advantages.* As our marketplace becomes globalized and our population

more diverse, bilingualism and biliteracy are valued increasingly by employers. Boswell (1998) found that Florida Hispanics who are fluent in both English and Spanish earned up to 50 percent more than those who speak only English. Similar patterns prevail in California, Texas, New York, and other immigrant-rich states. Besides opportunities in international business, bilinguals have a growing edge in the domestic job market, especially in science, technology, tourism, social services, and education. Ultimately, the graduates of developmental bilingual programs can help to remedy the chronic shortage of teachers for LEP students; that is, “we can grow our own” (Krashen et al., 1998).

- *Cultural vitality.* Maintaining skills in the heritage language opens worlds of experience that would otherwise be inaccessible – not only literature, art, and music, but also the daily life of ethnic communities. In the case of Native peoples, it can even determine whether those worlds survive. As a member of the Navajo tribal council remarked, in condemning English-only legislation: "Once we lose our language, we lose our culture and we're just another brown-skinned American" (quoted in Shebala, 1999).

### **What strategies look promising?**

Fishman (1991) argues that schools are relatively weak institutions for “reversing language shift.” Instructional programs, however effective in themselves, may prove insufficient to counteract the social pressures to assimilate into the dominant culture. Efforts to preserve or revitalize heritage languages in numerous countries suggest that schools alone cannot sustain them; to thrive, they need support in families, communities, and other “unofficial” domains.

This hypothesis has yet to be fully tested, owing to limited research on school-based approaches. Promising models include developmental and two-way bilingual education, which aim to cultivate bilingualism and biliteracy among LEP students. While academic outcomes have been encouraging, less is known about their long-term impact on heritage language proficiency. Until recent years, such programs were rare in the United States, where federal and state governments have favored the transitional approach of replacing other languages with English. Besides its limiting effects on instruction, this policy has exerted a powerful influence on language attitudes.

Children soon get the message: their native tongue has low prestige in this country and so do its speakers. No wonder most shift to English as soon as they can. For the few who wish to continue studying the heritage language, “foreign” language classrooms rarely meet their needs. A survey of biliterates in Southern California turned up frustrating memories of such instruction – for example, being criticized by teachers and classmates for speaking “substandard” vernaculars, lacking familiarity with grammatical rules, or not knowing the conventions of formal writing (Tse, in press). A 1997 study found that only 7 percent of U.S. secondary schools offer language courses for native speakers (Branaman & Rhodes, in press).

Absent well documented successes, little is certain about how to encourage the retention of these tongues. Tse (in press), however, offers some intriguing clues in a study that profiles native speakers who became literate in Cantonese, Spanish, or Japanese. All were young adults who shared two distinctive traits: (1) “seeing the heritage language as having high vitality – as useful and even prestigious” and (2) having “literacy experiences in the home and community at an early age.” Most of the subjects had, at one time or another, accepted the larger society’s negative stereotypes about their culture. But unlike many ethnic minorities, they overcame these stigmas through the influence of families and friendship networks. Contact with rich print environments – through churches, cultural activities, or language brokering for parents – also set them apart, laying a foundation for biliteracy in later years.

One implication of this research is clear. Literacy in heritage languages depends heavily on access to reading materials, which are now in short supply. Investing in public and school libraries in minority communities would be a feasible, cost-effective means of enhancing such skills (McQuillan, 1998).

Even small moves to promote the study of heritage languages could prove significant – in symbolic as well as practical terms. Of course, many such gestures will be needed to work the fundamental change in attitudes on which progress depends. Language is the ultimate consensual institution; changing behavior inevitably means changing minds. Few children will want to learn what few others deem valuable. Until we acknowledge our stake in cultivating bilingualism, by embracing rather than shunning the fruits of diversity, this country will deserve its reputation as the “cemetery of foreign languages” (Portes & Hao, 1998).

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