Linguistic Pluralism or Monolingual Melting Pot[1]

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Americans have come from every part of the world. Thousands of years ago nomads crossed the land bridge from Siberia to become American Indians. A thousand years ago Polynesian voyagers arrived in Hawai'i. Five hundred years ago Europeans began arriving, the Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, Dutch, Germans, Swedes, Norwegians and Danes. Later came the Irish, Italians, Ashkenazi Jews, Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Samoans and Filipinos. Recently we have experienced the arrival of Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians and others from Southeast Asia.

Each newly arriving group brought with it a unique language and cultural pattern which served to define its identity and values. For much of the history of the United States these cultural and linguistic groups maintained their own identity. They used their own language at home, church and school. It was not easy, of course, since each newly arriving group faced the reality that the dominant language and culture was of another immigrant group. For the United States, that group was the English. Gradually, over a generation or two, members of the new groups would adopt more and more of the dominant language and culture and use less of their own. Beginning with the first waves of Irish immigrants in the 1840's there was some outcry from the dominant group to enforce traditional linguistic and cultural values. With the rise of Asian and Eastern European immigration after the 1880's, local school boards, self-

1 [Previously published as "Culture and Language in America: Linguistic Pluralism or Monolingual Melting Pot" for Hawaii Pacific University's Noontime Culture Break: American Experience and American Values program, ca. 1984, funded by the Hawai'i Committee for the Humanities.]

styled educators and newspaper editorialists would decry the threat to "100% American" speech and ways, but there was no concerted social effort to force the change.

In the years following World War II a new era of tolerance seemed to have arrived. It was the spirit of *One World* that saw the creation of the United Nations. Despite the cold war that erupted between the United States and the Soviet Union, this new spirit was seen in such efforts as the Marshall Plan and the Peace Corps. It was also seen in the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 which provided funding for schools to develop bilingual education programs for non-English speaking and limited English speaking students. In 1974 the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the rights of these students in *Lau v. Nichols*.[2] The court's decision saw a lack of bilingual education as a denial of equal educational opportunity.

Following the tragedy of Vietnam, a new wave of immigrants from Southeast Asia began arriving. Just as those who came from China, Japan and the Philippines in earlier years, these new arrivals did not blend easily into the larger society. As was the case with other Asians, these new groups demonstrated a willingness to work and a desire to succeed that caused them to stand out from the rest of society. The result was tension between the new groups and the dominant English-speaking White majority. The dominant group was already concerned with the demands being made by the Black community, the Spanish-speaking Puerto Ricans in Eastern and Midwestern cities and the Chicanos in the barrios of the Southwest. There was a feeling that the Bilingual Education Act and the related Voting Rights Act (which mandated foreign language

2 [*Lau v. Nichols, 414* U.S. 563 (1974).]

ballots in communities with large non-English speaking populations) were somehow destroying traditional American values.

These tensions coalesced in the new right political movements of the 1980's. The organization which addressed the language concern was U.S. English. This group, which is strongly supported by educator and former U.S. Senator, S. I. Hayakawa, is working to have English instituted as the official language in all activities in the country and to ban the use of other languages. The futility of this short-sighted and xenophobic behavior can be clearly seen in the factors which argue for the voluntary acquisition of English skills. First, it is clear English has become the dominant language in commerce, communication, and transportation throughout the world. This is true to such an extent that the educational systems of several countries have instituted their *own* versions of U.S. English in efforts to protect their own languages from the inroads of English. Second, English is such a dominant force in America that no one living in this country can avoid its influence. There is more than ample evidence that the children of immigrants, even when they speak their parents' language at home and attend bilingual education classes in school, develop a fluency in the English of their peers and that of radio and television within a very short time after their arrival in the country. Third, as U.S. English insists in its arguments, a command of English is essential for success in the academic and business world. No one knows this better than those who don't speak English which is the reason they struggle so hard to gain a command of English. Indeed, if someone were to attempt to prevent a child living in the United States from learning English, barring total isolation, that effort would fail.

World War I brought an end to this relative tolerance. A wave of xenophobia swept the nation. State legislatures banned the use of "foreign" languages as the medium of instruction in elementary and secondary schools. The rich tradition of German language schools of Pennsylvania and the upper Midwest came to a sudden end. The fact that German-speaking nations were the enemy during the war provided a semblance of reason to the anti-foreign hysteria. Japan was an ally in that war, yet here in Hawaii in the years following the first World War, the Territorial government tried repeatedly to outlaw private Japanese language schools, efforts which were ultimately defeated in the U.S. Supreme Court *(Farrington v. Tokushige, 1927)*[3]. However, these efforts did succeed during World War II when the Martial Law government in Hawaii simply closed all language schools. The rich and tolerant diversity of linguistic pluralism threatened to be submerged by a new myth: America as the melting pot, where all cultural differences were to be simmered away into a slightly spicy but definitely Anglo-Saxon stew.

Language is an essential part of culture. Efforts to control language use, except perhaps with the most draconian measures, have failed wherever they have been tried. Those of us who lived in Hawaii during World War II will remember the military government's Speak American campaign. Certainly the campaign had its effect, mostly of a negative nature. Those who would speak a language other than English did so behind closed doors. The policy exacerbated the already existing animosity between the dominant and other groups. More significantly, it did not stop the use of languages other than English.

3 [*Farrington v. Tokushige*, 273 U.S. 284 (1927).]

A target of U.S. English and groups and individuals with similar views is bilingual education. It seems clear that much of the opposition to bilingual education is based on a lack of understanding of its purpose and objectives. At its elemental level, bilingual education is meant to allow children to progress in their learning of other skills and knowledge while they develop a proficiency in English. This *transitional* type of bilingual education is what many school systems, including the Hawai'i Department of Education, have adopted. Oddly, despite its affirmation by Supreme Court decision, many Americans regard the use of a language other than English in American classrooms as somehow being un-American.

In Hawai'i, where a significant number of public school students are native speakers of Ilokano, Tagalog, Samoan, Korean, Tongan, Vietnamese and Laotian languages, special programs to help educate such students are not as effective as they could be because of the reluctance of teachers to allow bilingual aides to speak the native language of their students. In addition, there are teachers and administrators who oppose this kind of transitional program as being outside previous American experience and an unnecessary crutch for the non-English speaking children. History tells us otherwise: a strong factor in the more successful immigrant groups was the maintenance of ethnic identity and support systems within their communities.

A more meaningful kind of bilingual program, drawing upon the speaker's cultural experiences, allows the non-English speaking child to retain and improve ability in the first language while learning English and acquiring skills and knowledge at the same rate as other children. Yet, it is this kind of *maintenance* bilingual program

that raises the hackles of the supporters of enforced English. They claim it will create a *balkanizing* of the United States and point to those other places in the world where they believe linguistic differences are the cause of social unrest.

The first country they usually point to is Canada. The claim is that conflict between the people of Quebec and those of the rest of the country exists because the *Quebecois* speak French while other Canadians speak English. No doubt language is a part of the problem, but certainly other differences related to history, religion, economic and social status are as or, perhaps, more important.

There are, in fact, many examples of successful federations of multilingual nations just as there are of unsuccessful monolingual peoples. The most striking examples of the former are China, India and Switzerland. On the other hand, the people of divided Germany, the two Koreas and the two Irelands speak each other's languages but don't get on in other ways. Nor should we forget the American experience of the Civil War between the Union and the Confederacy. This particular balkanizing was not the result of language differences.

The most absurd aspect of the position against maintenance bilingual education is their failure to relate to its parallel in the school curriculum – the foreign language program. Those who speak glowingly of the broadening experience of learning another language when they are speaking of a foreign language program, worry that a student's native language that is retained in a bilingual program is not a language on par with the official language of the student's new culture (which happens to be English in the United States). There seems to be a belief that there is such a thing as a superior or

inferior language, or languages that are better than others in disciplining the mind. In the American school experience, Latin and modern European languages have enjoyed the type of prestige that have attracted college-bound students. However, the level of proficiency developed after two to four years of study is often insufficient to enable students to think in the new language, or to discuss and analyze aspects of the group's history and culture.

The benefit that can accrue to students who are given the opportunity to retain their native language which they learned painlessly (providing the schools have well-thought out bilingual education and foreign language programs) is that they will be able to reach a level of proficiency which will enable them to communicate effectively and have a clear understanding of how a language is capable of expressing the thoughts of the people who speak that language. It enables them to have a deeper understanding and appreciation of the history, values, and civilization of their own ethnic group through the study of its literature and oral traditions.

Hawai'i has another language situation almost unique in the United States, that is, its use of Hawaii English Creole[4], commonly referred to as *pidgin*. Hawaii English Creole suffers an even greater status burden than do the languages of immigrant groups. Many in Hawai'i, including professional educators, describe it as *broken* English or *sub-standard* English with the implication that those who use it do so in some sort of perverse, anti-social way. But language scholars point out pidgin is simply another language that has its own syntax. People tend to impute lack of learning, low

4 [Although the study of Hawaii English Creole is now extensive, the pioneering work by Reinecke remains historically important. Cf. Reinecke, John. "'Pidgin English' in Hawaii: A Local Study in the Sociology of Language." *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 43, No. 5 (Mar., 1938), pp. 778-789.]

intelligence or moral character to the speaking of pidgin and fail to see that no language is intrinsically inferior or superior. In reality, it is the language spoken by people who have power and prestige in a society that becomes the *correct* language.

Hawai'i's educators have long considered the use of Hawaii English Creole to be a major problem of the school system. Over the years they have attempted to devise solutions to this problem, but with little success. The problem of our educators could be alleviated once they recognize Hawaii English Creole is the first language of a great majority of Hawai'i's children. Their task then is to teach the speakers of Hawai'i English Creole a second language – English.

Another part of the pidgin problem in Hawai'i is that of accent. Often what is actually just a regional Hawaiian accent or inflection is considered by educators and persons who grew up in some other part of the country to be *pidgin* English. A generation ago speech teachers at the University of Hawai'i struggled to eliminate this accent from the speech of their students. Those students who couldn't or wouldn't get rid of their *local* accent were driven from the institution. This attitude caused enormous hardship on Islanders before the policy was eliminated. However, it still lives in the minds of many in the community who, oddly, hold a much more lenient attitude toward the regional accents seen in such persons as John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, or Jimmy Carter.

For most of the twentieth century America has successfully melted away the great cultural diversity brought to these shores by the immigrants from many lands. The loss of linguistic and cultural knowledge by these immigrants has left America a

country which must interact with the rest of the world but uses ethnocentric values; it has resulted in a monolingual society which can communicate with the rest of the world only through interpreters. The observations of William Francis Mackey, in his forward to Heinz Kloss's *The American Bilingual Tradition* (1977)[5], should remind us Americans of our nation's history in respect to linguistic and cultural pluralism:

> In the United States there had indeed existed, alongside a seemingly all-dominant monolingualism, a tradition of bilingualism – chiefly below the national level, a tradition long neglected by American historians. In this nation of immigrants, which has conducted one of history's most successful experiments in political pluralism, it would have been surprising if there had been no room for the flowering of different cultures in different regions.

It may be that the adherents of the myth of the melting pot, those who want a monolingual and monocultural society, fear diversity because they are unfamiliar with our nation's bilingual tradition and rich experiences with cultural pluralism. Because we will continue to experience immigration and will continue to deal with multicultural issues and problems on the state, national, and international level, there is a necessity to abandon our xenophobia and fear of balkanizing in order to prevent Americans from being deprived of the rich linguistic and cultural heritages of the many ethnic, cultural, and national groups which have formed this nation.

5 [Kloss, Heinz. *The American Bilingual Tradition.* Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1977.]