

By William Z. Shetter

We Americans have a way of thinking of bilingualism - that is, effective control of at least two languages - as something unusual, entered into by only a few bicultural or highly trained people. But we were reminded in *Miniatures* No. 73 and 96 that, as a practical part of everyday life, the majority of the world population is bilingual.

English is the overwhelmingly dominant language of the U.S., but our country has always been home to a great variety of languages. Even when our first ancestors arrived: Native Americans spoke dozens of unrelated languages and had found ways to communicate with each other. Nevertheless, more and more we get the impression that the U.S. is more multilingual than it has ever been.

Here, in descending order, are a few of the largest languages in the U.S. Note that we don't call them "foreign languages", partly because some have been spoken here longer than English has: Native American languages for millennia, and both Spanish and French for four centuries. And remember that these are mostly not exclusive speech communities but that nearly all these speakers except the smallest children are bilingual in their language and English. These are the ones that have at least a million adult speakers:

- Spanish 31,000,000**
- Chinese 2,000,000**
- French 1,600,000 (this includes Cajun)**
- German 1,400,000 (including the PA German dialect; add another 400,000 speakers of other Germanic languages)**
- Tagalog 1,200,000 (pronounced ta-GA-log; the language of the Philippines)**
- Vietnamese 1,000,000 (and other S.E. Asian languages will add well over another million)**
- Italian 1,000,000**

A historical note here before we continue with the smaller ones. French, German-Scandinavian and Italian are the continuation of language communities that arrived generations ago. Vietnamese and Tagalog, on the other hand, are the result of recent large-scale immigration. Spanish combines both: many of the Spanish-speaking settlements especially in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California were established long before the U.S. existed as a country; today, with continuing immigration from Latin America, there are large numbers not only in these border states but in all our major cities. The first wave of Chinese immigration came by the middle of the 19th century, supplemented by continued immigration today.

Here are a few others that are spoken by over a hundred thousand people.

- Korean 900,000
- Russian 700,000
- Polish 667,000 (plus over 500,000 speakers of other Slavic languages)
- Arabic 600,000
- Portuguese 582,000
- Japanese 478,000
- Greek 365,000
- Navajo 178,000 (spoken mainly in Arizona and New Mexico. For all other Native N. American languages, add another 200,000)
- Yiddish 139,000 (add to that the 36,000 Yiddish-speaking children in New York City alone)

And these two groups are only a representative sample. You can readily add to this dozens of other languages such as Armenian, languages of India (nearly 1,800,000 total) and Africa (over 400,000 total), and many others with close to a hundred thousand speakers each.

The 2000 U.S. census lists the total number of those who claim to "speak a language other than English" at just under 47,000,000. That means that, since practically all these citizens speak English in addition, the bilingual share of the total U.S. population is just a little short of 18%. Would you have guessed that something like *one American in every five or six* is a true bilingual?

Occasionally Americans look at figures like this with a sense of unease, even alarm, feeling that maybe the country is being flooded with immigrants from elsewhere, possibly at some time in the future pushing the English language into a subordinate position. After all the Constitution does not declare that English has the status of 'official language', (because the original framers wisely decided that this would be an unnecessary intrusion into individual liberty). Possibly as a result of this, the U.S. has never had a language policy or language planning process. More than once in the past, Americans have felt an urge to impose a monolingualism born out of a unfocused fear that speaking another language somehow implied disloyalty. The result was persecution of linguistic minorities such as Native Americans, Chinese, Germans, Spanish and Japanese.

This colorful linguistic picture notwithstanding, we can rest assured that the English language is in no danger. These millions of speakers of other languages in the U.S. don't need to be told that English, the language of government, education and commerce, is and will always be the only real road to success. In fact, for years figures have been showing unambiguously that new immigrant children are moving to English dominance

at a faster rate than ever before.

Any stance that involves anxiously safeguarding the place of the English language looks curiously misplaced, perhaps even a bit perverse, in view of the way English is sweeping the globe and rapidly becoming everyone's 'second language' on a worldwide scale. Monolingualism is simply unrealistic and outmoded in today's world. We should be safeguarding these linguistic treasures within our borders, which can help us meet our present and future needs for advanced language competence. Americans are just in the beginning stages of realizing this.

These figures come from the Newsletter of the Modern Language Association (spring 2003) and from the U.S. Census Bureau.

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