

[“America’s Fabric # 9  
**Unilingualism v. Bilingualism**  
March 9, 2008]

Good morning. Welcome to “America’s Fabric,” a radio series that encourages patriotism.

Our program this morning continues the theme of unity, a theme prominently displayed in recent programs on the lives of Lincoln and Washington, and Noah Webster.

As we saw last Sunday, in the life of Noah Webster, there is a connection between unity and freedom and language. Webster devoted his life to standardizing American English so Americans from every region of the country could understand each other. His American Dictionary of the English Language, which Webster published in 1828 after twenty-five years of research, was a tremendously effective contribution to the unity of Americans—and hence to American freedom.

As anyone who has traveled in a foreign country without knowing its language can testify, a person’s inability to communicate freely with those around them restricts their participation in that society. Being able to communicate freely and fully is necessary to looking for opportunities, economic advancement, and participation in the duties of citizenship.

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A nation in which one language is used in the conduct of daily life is referred to as *unilingual*; a nation that uses two languages is referred to as *bilingual*. The United States is a unilingual nation. Canada is a bilingual nation, where laws are published in both English and French, and a myriad of other aspects of life are also conducted in both languages. In Canada there are two linguistic classes: “francophones” (who use French)

and “anglophones” (who use English). Both groups have legally-recognized, rigorously enforced language rights, such as the right, when dying, to be attended by medical personnel who speak their language.

In the past thirty years, bilingualism has been instituted in U. S. public schools, to the detriment of America’s unilingualism.

“Bilingual education,” as it is called, was promoted in the United States as a humane way to help students whose first language was not English to do their regular school subjects *and* make the transition to learning standard English. This appeal to compassion succeeded. The idea of non-English instruction in U. S. public schools was accepted; and for decades now, taxpayers across America have been pouring millions of dollars into “bilingual education.” According to an article in the Arizona Daily Star five days ago (March 4, 2008, pp. A2, A4), “bilingual education” in Arizona alone costs forty million six hundred thousand dollars a year. But, despite such large expenditures, “bilingual education” is not an effective bridge to learning standard English.

We’ll return, in a moment, to the bad effects that “bilingual education” is having on American society.

But, first, let us appreciate how a vast nation, speaking one language, was created from masses of immigrants speaking many languages.

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Proponents of bilingualism often praise Europeans for their knowledge of various languages and castigate Americans for their unilingualism. Oh, if Americans were only better educated and could speak more than just their native tongue! Wouldn’t that be wonderful!? Look at the Europeans! Why, they often know more than one language.

To be sure, they do. And knowledge of more than one language is, indeed, a good thing, because knowledge in general is a very good thing. However, let us consider a basic truth about life in Europe, namely that a European can hardly travel more than a few hundred miles in any direction without entering a language community different from the one in which he was born. Indeed, in some parts of Europe like the Balkans, a journey of a few hundred miles would involve the traveler in passing through as many as half a dozen language communities. Being multilingual in Europe is a necessity. Any European actively involved in his continent's political, economic, and cultural life has to know more than one language. If Europeans could go from the northernmost cape of Norway to the southernmost headland of Italy, and from Ireland's west coast to the foothills of the Ural Mountains in Russia, and communicate at every stage of their travels with their fellow Europeans in a single language, believe me, few of them would know several languages.

As I have remarked before in these radio programs, Europe and the United States are the same size. Both encompass three million eight hundred thousand square miles. Yet we Americans, because of our country's remarkable history of unilingualism, can travel the length and breadth of our continent-sized country and use a single language.

We do not have to use more than one language. Europeans do not enjoy that freedom.

Not only is linguistic unity one of the superlative accomplishments of American history, and an essential component of our great freedom of movement as a people, it is also a fundamental factor in our country's prosperity and political stability.

Our unilingualism is the core of our American identity. Without our belief in the benefits of speaking one language, the tens of millions of non-English-speaking immigrants who have come to the United States in the past 400 years could not have melded into one nationality and become fully productive citizens capable of freely pursuing their dream of self-improvement in America.

In the 1930s, the American novelist John Dos Passos published three related novels about life in the United States. John Dos Passos titled his trilogy: U. S. A., and in the preface he wrote for it he mused on the meaning of America:

U. S. A. is the slice of a continent. U. S. A. is a group of holding companies, some aggregations of trade unions, a set of laws bound in calf, a radio network, a chain of moving picture theatres, a column of stock-quotations . . . a publiclibrary full of old newspapers and dogeared history books. . . . U. S. A. is the world's largest river valley fringed with mountains and hills, U. S. A. is a set of bigmouthed officials with too many bankaccounts. U. S. A. is a lot of men buried in their uniforms in Arlington Cemetery. U. S. A. is the letters at the end of an address when you are away from home. But mostly U. S. A. is the speech of the people.

That's it in a nutshell: the language we have shared as a people and used in our daily lives throughout our history is mostly what makes us Americans. Of course, there's more to our national identity than language; but it is our common language that mostly identifies us to each other as Americans. If we should lose our linguistic coherence, we would lose our unity as a people, diminish our freedom, and irreparably weaken our nation.

The worth of the recent educational reform known as “No Child Left Behind” may be debatable. But there can be no debate about whether children who do not learn standard American English can participate fully and freely in the economic, political, and social life of the United States. They can’t.

I have known quite a few adults—including my dear mother-in-law, Blanca Herrera Diaz—who came to live in the United States in the middle years of their lives, when learning a new language is difficult, who nonetheless acquired enough English to become American citizens and fulfill the duties of their new citizenship. And, we should remember, there are men buried in Arlington Cemetery who did not speak good, standard English when they gave their lives in military service to the United States. But for any adolescent in America today to graduate from a public high school without sufficient English to read and fill out an application form for a job defies common sense. Yet this is happening. Teenagers are, under the influence of “bilingual education” and its corollary: “multiculturalism,” being graduated without enough knowledge of English to be responsible citizens and productive workers, capable of earning their own livelihood.

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Historically, many immigrants on their arrival in America from non-English-speaking countries often took up residence, at least for a time, in what might be called linguistic ghettos—that is, neighborhoods in American cities, towns, and rural areas where the familiar language of their native country was in daily use. This understandable behavior mitigated the initial culture shock of being in a new country whose language they did not understand.

But some immigrants remained in these linguistic ghettos without ever making a transition to the larger, English-speaking society around them. They thus forfeited the freedom of movement and the opportunities that would have been theirs had they learned standard American English. It cannot be thought that minimizing, rather than maximizing, contact with a language helps a person to learn it. The less contact a person has with English-usage the less English they will know.

That is why Americans employed in a foreign country at English-language work sites, who live in linguistic ghettos such as American military bases or corporate compounds, seldom acquire sufficient knowledge of the language of that country to permit full and free communication with its native speakers.

It is only common sense that to learn a language you have to be constantly hearing and using it—which is how babies learn their mother tongue and why college-age students who wish to become proficient in a foreign language have to spend a semester, or more, in a country where that language is spoken. Learning a language necessitates *immersion* in it.

Forty years ago, when my wife and I took our children to live for a year in a European country where I had received an appointment as a Fulbright Professor of American Studies, I observed firsthand how language is acquired through immersion.

Our daughters were 11, 8, and 7 years old; our son, 4. My wife enrolled our three girls in a public grade school and our son in a kindergarten; instruction in both schools was in the language of the country. They soon made friends at school and among the children living in the building where we rented an apartment, some of whom went to the same schools they did. Within three or four months of their immersion in this language,

our children were using Spanish and rapidly acquiring greater fluency in it. I remember well the day I came into the living room of our apartment and heard my four-year-old son jabbering away at his toys in Spanish.

Historically, children who immigrated to America with their non-English-speaking parents were subjected to the same immersion our children went through in Spain: their teachers gave them as much extra help as time and resources permitted; but they were not coddled by being put in special, “bilingual” classes. Typically, these children acquired more knowledge of English than their parents, who either could not go to school because of work commitments or were content with life in a linguistic ghetto.

Typically, the children of non-English-speaking immigrants—because of their acquisition of American English and the lure of opportunities in the larger, English-speaking society—moved out of their parents’ linguistic ghetto as soon as they could.

Their children—the grandchildren of the non-English-speaking immigrant—grew up outside the ghetto, and were in most cases entirely assimilated into American culture.

One of my mother’s grandfathers exemplified the pattern. He came to America in the 1840s at the age of eleven with his German-speaking parents, and grew up to become a storeowner in a small town in western Pennsylvania. When I asked one of this immigrant’s American-born sons—my maternal grandfather—why he and his four brothers and sisters, my Wagner great-uncles and -aunts, did not speak German, he said his father had wanted his children to use only English and never spoken German to them.

Today, this pattern of complete assimilation by the third generation after immigration is being compromised by the doctrines of “bilingual education” and “multiculturalism.” Instruction in bilingual education is thwarting, not facilitating, the

assimilation of non-English-speakers. Even for children born in America, “bilingual education” and “multiculturalism” are weakening the standards for American English so painstakingly put in place by Noah Webster and nine generations of American public school teachers. The effect of this new development is evident in the remedial courses in English that are increasingly needed in American universities today, even for students whose first language is English.

“Bilingual education” and “multiculturalism” are creating a sense of entitlement among minority groups in the United States, an entitlement to perpetuate languages other than standard American English. These include, besides various European and Asian languages, the substandard patois known as “Black English.”

As the pattern of perpetuating linguistic separation becomes more widespread, where it will lead if it continues is clear: the United States will lose the inestimable benefit of being a country as big as the continent of Europe in which the same language is understood.

Already in the United States under the dual influence of “bilingual education” and “multiculturalism,” telephone users are being greeted in both Spanish and English and asked whether they want to continue the message in Spanish or English; and voters are using ballots printed in both of these languages.

These are not encouraging developments. They impede linguistic integration. They are steps in the direction of bilingualism, of economic inequality; and a weakening of American identity. Freedom and equality are not being served by breaking down our unilingual society into different language communities.



In short, by favoring “bilingual education” we are creating permanent linguistic ghettos whose residents cannot participate fully in the social and economic freedom that we Americans are used to because of our unilingualism. Today, descendants of non-English-speaking immigrants often remain in the linguistic ghetto for longer than two generations.

“Bilingual education” claims, in theory, to be a way of teaching English to non-English speakers. But, in practice, it is a way of putting other languages on a par with English; thus replacing a unilingual society, distinguished by its extraordinary freedom of mobility, with a bilingual society that will be distinguished by linguistic separatism.

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I have referred to “multiculturalism” several times in relation to “bilingual education.” What is “multiculturalism”?

It is the theory that every culture has equal value and should be given equal respect, which sounds better than it is in practice.

In the same way that compassion for non-English-speaking children was used to sell “bilingual education,” the doctrine of “multiculturalism” has been established nationwide in our universities and our public schools by an appeal to tolerance. It turns out, however, that “multiculturalism” is not equally tolerant of every culture. For “multiculturalism” sees the preference most Americans have for their own culture as a form of “racism.” Indeed, according to multiculturalists, American culture has less value than other cultures because it is guilty not only of “racism” but also of “sexism, homophobia, slavery, genocide, and imperialism.”

In reality, though, cultures cannot have equal value. The culture that provides a person the beliefs he lives by inevitably has more value than any other culture.

Moreover, if, as “multiculturalism” preaches, every culture has equal value and worth, why does “multiculturalism” judge the cultures of Christian civilization (especially American culture) so harshly? And why, in classrooms where “multiculturalism” is preached, are non-Christian cultures such as Islam not incessantly accused of “racism, sexism, homophobia, slavery, genocide, and imperialism”?

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Not surprisingly, the institutionalization of “bilingual education” and “multiculturalism” in our nation’s public schools have strengthened these doctrines. For every doctrine is strengthened by teaching it. Under the influence of “bilingual education,” we are now conditioning whole generations to believe there is no particular value in everyone having a good command of the same language. Under the influence of “multiculturalism,” we are teaching young Americans to think American culture has no special value for them. Thus we are funding the education of more and more adolescents these days who feel little or no American identity.

Now that the effects of “bilingual education” and “multiculturalism” are becoming clear, we should rid our public schools of these doctrines. We are not practicing compassion and tolerance by teaching them. We are demolishing our country’s unity.

Whether these doctrines were devised to disunite America, or whether the disunity they are producing is an unintended consequence of good intentions is beside the

point. It's the *effects*, not the intentions, of "bilingual education" and "multiculturalism" that must be judged.

Patriotism is love of one's country. It's a love that wants to conserve—not change—the things in a country's history that are good. And unilingualism is one of the best things about the United States of America, along with our Constitution, majority rule, and personal responsibility.

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I'd like to close today's program with two observations concerning our broadcasts. First, we've been on the air now for two months with your support, and I want to thank all of you who have given us your support. Air-time for these programs must be paid for, and unless we receive contributions "America's Fabric" cannot remain on the air. If you've been listening to these programs and they have encouraged you to love your country more, and you've been thinking of sending us a check: now is the time to do it. Make checks payable to "America's Fabric, Incorporated" and mail them to: Post Office Box seventeen three fifty-six, Tucson, Arizona, 85731.

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That address again is: Post Office Box seventeen three fifty-six, Tucson, 85731.

Secondly, please use our website: [americasfabric.com](http://americasfabric.com) and tell me what you think of these programs. You could also mail your opinion to: P. O. Box seventeen three fifty-six, Tucson 85731. Audios of our broadcasts are available on the website: [americasfabric.com](http://americasfabric.com).

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Until next Sunday, then, at eight o'clock—when our topic will be the Constitution of the United States: why we revere it and why we need it—this is your host for “America’s Fabric,” John McElroy, reminding you to stay proud—and grateful—to be an American.

And remember: America is the land of the free because it is the home of the brave.