

Bilingualism Endangered: The Status Quo of Linguistic Diversity in the U.S.

By Victoria Hasko, The University of Georgia

During my spring break trip to Miami I was soaking in more than the sunshine: the surrounding conversational cacophony of seemingly innumerable foreign languages and accents was linguistic music to my ears of an applied linguist and language educator. While language diversity in the United States, like immigration, is a predominantly metropolitan phenomenon and is concentrated in cities and states along the coast rather than in the heartland, the fact that nearly 61.5 million Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014) speak a foreign language at home certainly qualifies the country as a polyglot society.

Yet, the paradox of American societal plurilingualism is one of a highly fleeing variety: foreign language proficiency propelled by immigration has been documented as short lived and transitional in the United States, surviving only one or two generations (Grosjean, 2010) before succumbing to the predominant monolingualism, even in linguistically diverse neighborhoods. Drawing on the historical census data, Rumbaut and Massey (2013) conclude that the prospects for the future of stable bilingualism in the United States are unlikely, given what they refer to as the country's "well established reputation as a graveyard for immigrant languages" (p. 141). For foreign language educators, parents, and communities wishing for a plurilingual and pluricultural future for the increasingly diverse new generations of Americans in the 21st century, is there hope for a more promising prognosis?

In an age of superdiversity, world interconnectedness, and global plurilingual communication networks, the chronic affliction with monolingualism seems particularly paradoxical if not absurd for a nation of immigrants like the United States. In 1979, the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies found that "Americans' incompetence in foreign languages is nothing short of scandalous" (Li,

1980). Today, the persistent lack of Americans' proficiency in a second language is just as embarrassing, [as recently acknowledged by President Obama](#), who admittedly does not speak a foreign language himself. In a country whose linguistic heritage is widely diverse, with all the premises, potential, and resources to foster a polyglot society, it is regretful that *only* 61.8 million Americans (21% of the population) report speaking a language other than English, and furthermore, that newly arrived immigrants tend to lose their linguistic heritage within a span of one or two generations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014.)

Unfortunately, these facts become less surprising if we consider the reality of the U.S. national educational system and the devalued status of language studies in the curriculum, policy planning, and in the court of public opinion. Scant or ever-receding federal allocations for foreign language education are forcing public school systems to offset the budget cuts by eliminating foreign language requirements (including Georgia high schools), and decreasing the number of faculty lines. According to the [2015 report](#) from the Modern Language Association, overall enrollment in foreign language courses in U.S. universities is down 6.9% from 2009, with some major European languages (e.g., Spanish and German) experiencing records lows since the 1950s. Another measure of declining interest in language is the Advanced Placement (AP) Program, which reveals that [in 2014, AP examinations](#) in foreign languages accounted for less than 5 percent of the almost 4.2 million exams taken that year, with increases in growth trends ranging from slowing (Chinese) to flat (Spanish) from the previous year. Several states, including Georgia, have recently canceled foreign language coursework as a high school graduation requirement, and some public schools are choosing to [drop foreign languages altogether](#).

A recent report produced by prominent U.S. academics, *Languages For All?* (2013), decries meager or nonexistent funding for foreign languages in the newest national educational initiatives (specifically, citing Common Core, National Education Technology Plan, ConnectED, and other recent policy efforts). While the goal of the report is to articulate an

ambitious vision and an action plan for providing universal and equal access for foreign language education for all U.S. learners, its conclusion ends on a very realistic if slightly pessimistic note: “Budget constraints, conflicting priorities and legislative stalemates make leadership on this issue at the federal level difficult if not impossible. Under these conditions, it makes no sense to wait for government to come around” (p.9).

Indeed, the current political climate does not favor backing foreign languages, especially if it means supporting bilingual development for immigrant students in their minority language. Recent months have been particularly dispiriting for proponents of immigrant communities, with intolerant rhetoric surging in mass and social media. The topics of immigration, border control, mass deportation, religious (in)tolerance, and refugee asylum have emerged as highly divisive issues in the ongoing U.S. Presidential debates often result in statements denigrating immigrants under the slogans of national security and trumped-up patriotism. They feed into the increasingly unapologetic xenophobic public discourse not only in the ever-proliferating hateful social media output by anonymous online trolls, but also quite openly by political power figures via well respected media channels. The use of foreign languages is being decried as anti-American and seems less welcome day by day.

While the “[Speak American](#)” slogan, a sad byproduct of the intolerant 2016 pre-election rhetoric, has been widely ridiculed, it is hard to laugh off or dismiss xenophobic attitudes as non-consequential or transitory, given that symbolic violence against foreign language use can and does result in physical aggression against immigrant communities. Several recent cases reported in mass media specifically include violence and/or unjust treatment of families speaking foreign languages amongst each other and in the presence of their own children. For example, in August of 2015, in Los Angeles -- which tops the list of the cities with the largest number of Spanish speakers in the country -- a woman from El Salvador was enjoying a celebratory meal with her children at a family restaurant [when she was angrily berated by an elderly white woman for speaking Spanish, essentially](#)

accused of treason and told “to go to Spain.” This verbal attack pales in comparison to another incident in Minnesota, which occurred in November of 2015, when an immigrant mother from Kenya was brutally assaulted by a middle age woman only for the mere fact of speaking Swahili, her native language, to her four children and family members at a neighborhood restaurant. The attacker smashed a beer mug across the victim’s face and was charged with a third-degree assault. After the November 2015 Paris attacks, there has been a wave of reported incidents of passengers who were not allowed on a plane or who were escorted off because they were overheard speaking [Arabic](#).

Yet another paradoxical fact about U.S. monolingualism is that, in the context aside from politics and xenophobia, most Americans would agree that speaking multiple languages is a worthy and desirable asset. Many parents in affluent communities would undoubtedly beam with pride if their children were to demonstrate fluency in a second language in front of relatives and friends. Indeed, the wealthiest of Americans spend fortunes on private bilingual schools, hiring bilingual nannies, hosting bilingual *au pairs* to help with raising bilingual tots, or securing placements for children in international bilingual schools. Bilingual children, especially when educated in such exclusive education circumstances, undeniably signify upward financial mobility, prestige, worldliness, sophistication and elite status to many; in fact, this type of bilingualism is referred to as “elite” in bilingual research.

And yet, while an image of a French *au pair* conversing with a toddler in French would be expected to stir adoration if not envy in other moms, a Hispanic mother speaking Spanish or Swahili to her children may provoke a very different reaction (as exemplified in the aforementioned news stories) – an image no doubt tainted by the fact that Spanish and Swahili are spoken by immigrant minorities many of whom may be socioeconomically disadvantaged and whose very identity, race, heritage, familial communication practices, and traditions are, therefore, brutalized and illegitimized in the court of politicized public opinion.

It is not very surprising that many of these parents either purposefully decide not to use their heritage language with their children or simply lack the support and resources to do so. As a consequence, young children who could grow up as bilinguals who are fluent in a variety of critically needed languages (which are often almost impossible to fully master for an English speaker due to their complexity and interlingual distance from English), grow up speaking “American.” Financial, education, and national security considerations aside, further humanitarian consequences of heritage language loss can be colossal and tragic, resulting in families in which children lose the ability to communicate with their extended families, grandparents, or even one of the parents. Where are we heading with prospects for sustainable and desirable bilingualism?

I certainly agree with the *Languages For All?* (2013) report that deems it unrealistic to wait for the federal policies to change in the near future and instead calls for “mobilizing the education, industry, heritage, and overseas sectors to collective action in a grassroots effort in collaboration with the national security entities in the federal government and the economic interests in state governments” (p. 9). Indeed, the last couple of years have brought highly encouraging steep positive growth trends [in dual language immersion education initiatives](#) across multiple states in spite of the fact that the U.S. Department of Education has all but eliminated the term “bilingual” from its sponsored programs and recommended practices.

For example, [Georgia is emerging as an example](#) of the strides that can be reached at the state level when local language education enthusiasts pursue a united agenda, as the dual language immersion initiative is experiencing unprecedented growth rates in several school districts. Dual language program numbers have surged from two dual language immersion schools in 2008 to 19 schools with such programs in 2015, with five more such programs to open in fall 2016. In Utah and Portland, 9 to 10 percent of the states’ public elementary students are enrolled in dual language programs, with rapid expansion plans underway in Delaware, New York,

North Carolina, Massachusetts, Washington, D.C., and in other states. It is particularly encouraging that these bilingual programs are wanted and sought after by local communities and parents. Most of them use a lottery system for admissions, and the waiting lists are unprecedentedly long: one school in D.C. has reported [1,100 applicants for 20 slots](#). As of March 2016, 14 states and D.C. formally recognize students' bilingualism at graduation, and 13 more states are in the process of developing similar initiatives.

It is exciting to witness the early signs of the emerging local awareness of the importance of multilingualism, even amidst the largely hostile sociopolitical climate in the country. Obviously, much remains to be done to further the progress. To advance the bilingualism advocacy agenda, language educators need to continue serving as unabashed champions for foreign languages, for their language minority learners and their families, and to bring about change in their local discourses by serving as proponents of bilingual education. We need to think about effective ways to reach, encourage, and equip parents with strategies for promoting and sustaining bilingual language use and biliteracy at home and to embolden immigrant communities to preserve their linguistic and cultural heritage. It is important to engage the public at large, school administration, policy makers, neighbors, and friends, one conversation at a time, about a number of issues. These include the obvious benefits of bilingualism for the U.S. national and financial security and the attested cognitive benefits of bilingualism. Further, we should emphasize the importance of heritage language maintenance for the emotional and social well-being and prosperity of immigrant communities, families, and children, and the health of the United States as a cohesive nation, challenging *status quo* beliefs about what it means to be and speak as an American, in the 2016 election year and beyond.

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Dr. Victoria Hasko is Associate Professor of TESOL and World Language Education in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia. Her research includes acquisition of culturally-mediated concepts by second, foreign, and heritage language learners and the dynamics of language development as it interrelates with students' learning histories and sociocultural milieus.

