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# The Status of Spanish in the United States

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This essay focuses on the status of Spanish within the American educational system. The central argument of the article is that the high number of native speakers of Spanish and non-native learners of the language in the United States should not mask a number of serious issues facing the language in that country.

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Spanish was the first European language to be spoken in the Americas, and its roots in what is now the United States long predate the advent of English. A permanent Spanish settlement was established at St Augustine in Florida in 1565, and Santa Fe in New Mexico was founded by the Spanish in 1609. At one time, Spain could lay claim to a great swathe of territory, from Florida in the east right over to California and Oregon in the west. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, Texas, California, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico had all passed to United States control, and the Mexican border, as we know it, had been established. Despite these long antecedents, only in a very restricted part of some states can one find an unbroken Spanish-speaking tradition: South Texas, Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado. To a great degree, the Spanish-speaking population of the United States is a result of more recent immigrations. Especially after the Second World War, the flow commenced to cities in the Northeast, to New York and Philadelphia. Much of the influx – migration rather than immigration – came from another part of the United States, from Puerto Rico. Cuba also sent significant numbers. The island has had links with both South Florida and New York since the nineteenth century, but the big immigration flow came after Castro's accession to power in the late 1950s. Mexican immigration commenced in large numbers in the 1960s, initially to the border states of the south, but in recent years ever further northwards. There have been significant immigrations from other Latin American countries also, especially people fleeing the civil war in Colombia or the endemic poverty of places like Ecuador, Peru and Central America.

Notwithstanding the presence of Spanish in the United States from the earliest days, the predominance of Spanish over other languages in the US educational system is a fairly recent phenomenon. Throughout the nineteenth century and as late as the First World War, German was the most commonly taught modern language in the United States. However, the anti-German attitudes that sprang up or in many cases were cultivated during the war

cast the language into a chasm from which it never emerged. The 1920s and 1930s saw French pre-eminent, albeit with the beginnings of interest in the teaching of Spanish. Latin was still far more widely taught than any modern language during these decades, and in fact most high school students did not study any foreign language. World War II and its sequel proved fatal to enrolments in Latin, and the language became restricted to a tiny minority of schools (Barnwell, 1996). By the 1960s French and Spanish were about even, each language averaging a little more than 10 per cent of all high school students. Since the 1970s, however, there has been a clear shift towards Spanish in schools and colleges throughout the country, with the result that today Spanish is the most commonly taught second language in the United States. At the primary or elementary level, though only some six per cent of children study foreign languages, about four in five of those learn Spanish (Branaman & Rhodes, 1999). Spanish is also by far the most popular at secondary level, studied by about 28 per cent of all high school students, well ahead of its only rival, French, at 11 per cent, with German far back at three per cent (Draper & Hicks, 1996). The hegemony of Spanish here might be even greater, were it not for the fact that students who seek to take Spanish are often shunted towards taking another language instead in an attempt to even out numbers. At university and college, the balance may not be quite as skewed, but there is no doubt that Spanish dominates here too. In her survey of the college enrolment statistics for 2002, Elizabeth Welles reported that over half a million students at four-year institutions were studying Spanish, amounting to about half the total number studying languages in colleges and universities. This was out of a total undergraduate population of almost 16 million (Welles, 2004).

Though university foreign language requirements have fairly steadily eased over the decades, evidence of some proficiency in a foreign language remains an admission requirement at 26 per cent of the colleges and universities in the United States. Yet despite the fact that a lot of people study Spanish, the number who specialise in the subject is small. For instance, in 2004, among the more than one million Bachelors degrees conferred, only 8000 are listed as degrees in Spanish (NCES, 2006). This is an underestimate, since it fails to include people with degrees in such things as education with a concentration in Spanish, and linguistics or perhaps anthropology with concentration in Spanish. Nevertheless, the picture of the statistics yield is clear – the academic study of Spanish to a reasonably advanced level is very much a minority pursuit. A lot of students take elementary and/or intermediate classes, but few continue with Spanish to degree level. They enrol for a beginners class at college, even though they may have studied the language for years in high school. It is a commonplace that many people spend their entire educational sequence taking and retaking Elementary Spanish. The pattern is not too different at high school, where one in three students who begin Spanish discontinue it within a year. This becomes almost two out of three who drop the language after second year and rises to 90 per cent of students discontinuing Spanish before they reach the fourth year, the stage at which they might be expected to be acquiring worthwhile proficiency in the language (Brod & Huber, 1994).

The American education system presents a picture of attrition to the point of wastage. Given the large number of students who take languages in high school and college, the end result is poor in terms of number of language majors or proficiency among majors or non-majors. It would be naive to believe that foreign language education is today a central concern of the majority of Americans. Whenever national soul-searching about low educational standards is provoked by the release of studies which adversely compare American children's attainment with that of children in other countries, it is striking that it is mathematics or the sciences which are highlighted, not foreign language proficiency. The only time foreign language attracts national political attention is when issues such as the dearth of Arabic speakers are raised in terms of national security needs, such as set out in the President's National Security Language Initiative (US Department of Education, 2006). It bears comment too that over half of American high school students still do not study any second language. A disproportionate element of these are of lower socioeconomic background, and/or black, and/or living in city centres or in small rural communities (Finn, 1998; Organization of African-American Linguists, 2007).

Among the non-Hispanic population, what one author terms 'an American Urban Legend' (Friedrich, 1997), there's a stereotype that Spanish is somehow 'easier' to learn than other languages. This assumption has recently been challenged in several places, including – somewhat ironically – by the American Association of Teachers of French, anxious not to dissuade students from taking up the study of that language. However, the strength of the stereotype in popular culture has hardly been shaken. The panorama nationally might appear healthy for Spanish, but it has brought its own drawbacks, ranging from the difficulty of finding qualified Spanish teachers to the problem of large class size. To address the former issue, some states have recruited teachers of Spanish from abroad (Barber, 2003). While no formal study appears to have been carried out on this, there is anecdotal evidence that such programmes have not always been successful, as the foreign teachers found it difficult to adjust to the culture of the US educational system (Archibold, 1998). In the case of teachers from Spain, there has been the added problem of how American Hispanic children react to peninsular Spanish pronunciation and vocabulary, and vice versa. The primacy of Spanish even causes concern among teachers of the language. For example, a group of colleges in Massachusetts held a conference on the topic in 1999, under the title 'The Future of Spanish Departments on College Campuses'. The debate centred on how vast enrolments in lower-level Spanish were changing the Spanish department's role from that of focus for enquiry into literary and cultural issues to that of assembly line provider of elementary and intermediate language courses (Kelm, 2000).

The overbearing position of Spanish has come about in the absence of any national policy either to promote it or to foster diversity among the languages on offer to American students. There is no reference to language, or indeed education, in either the American Declaration of Independence or the Constitution of the United States. There is no federal policy on languages in education, and very often not much of a state policy either. This *laissez-faire* tradition

permitted the quantum leap in numbers studying Spanish and the consequent fall off in those studying other languages. There are signs that this is changing somewhat; no one disputes the importance of Spanish in terms of history, geography and number of speakers, but there is a growing realisation that efforts must be made to see that it does not squeeze out other important languages from the system.

All labels conceal diversity, none more so than the word 'Hispanic'. The word will be used here to refer to people whose family origins fully or partially lie in the countries of Latin America, Central America and Mexico. As to the word itself, some people object to the term, preferring 'Latino' or occasionally even 'Spanish'. However, a 2002 survey showed that 'Hispanic' was preferred to 'Latino'. Most striking in the survey, however, was that most of the people we will label 'Hispanics' actually identified themselves by their national origins – Colombian, Mexican, American etc – rather than by a blanket ethnic designation. Hispanics are of different nationalities and generations, with varying levels of formal education, be it through Spanish or English, showing different age profiles (Cubans are older), from citizens to illegal aliens, etc. Significant differences on a range of attitudes are apparent depending on whether Hispanics were born in the United States or abroad and whether they are primarily Spanish or English speaking. Among native-born Latinos and those who are fully fluent in English, views on a range of issues are often closer to those of non-Hispanics than to those who are foreign born or Spanish speakers (Pew Hispanic Center, 2002; Vega, 2006). Pretty much all Spanish speakers are Hispanics, but not all Hispanics are Spanish speakers. Many Hispanics, though perhaps not a majority, are completely fluent in Spanish, that is to say that they dominate a range of registers, from the informal and intimate to the public or formal, written as well as spoken. Often such people received some of their earlier education through that language before coming to the United States. Others exhibit good listening comprehension but much inferior speaking ability and no range of registers in Spanish, the type who will say that they speak Spanish to their *abuelita*. Another significant minority of 'Hispanics' are Hispanic only in name, and come from monolingual anglophone households. And indeed there is also a significant number of Hispanics who are not Hispanic in name, but are strongly Hispanic in culture – one thinks of prominent US politician Bill Richardson. The issue is further complicated by the fact that language proficiency is self-reported in demographic studies of the question; no one is checked to see whether he or she is truly a native speaker. The Modern Language Association, prime professional body for those involved in language and literature, gives figures for what it terms 'speakers of Spanish or Spanish Creole' at 28 million, about 10 per cent of the entire US population (Modern Language Association, 2007). The statistic is problematic, since apart from the rather odd designation 'Spanish Creole', we are not told whether 'speakers' is to equate to 'native speakers'. Given the less than satisfactory statistics available, it might be best to err on the low side. It seems clear that at a minimum, the figure of what might be termed native speakers of Spanish in the United States is in excess of 20 million or some seven per cent of the population. This makes the United States the fifth-largest

Spanish speaking population in the world, after Mexico, Spain, Colombia and Argentina.

In the last full US Census, taken in 2000, over 35 million people ticked on the 'Spanish/Hispanic/Latino' category to report their ethnic identification (Bureau of the Census, 2005). This was a large increase on the figure of 22 million in the census of a decade earlier (Bureau of the Census, 1994). In passing, it might bear mentioning that reported ethnic origin is a rather slippery construct. Note that in the 1990 census almost 39 million people gave 'Irish' as one of their ethnic origins, while 10 years later this fell to fewer than 31 million. Since there is no reason to think that almost a quarter of Irish-Americans died in that decade, caution is warranted in building too much on such figures.

While people in the country illegally were encouraged to participate in the census, it would be prudent to expect that significant numbers of these are not reported. Hence the true figure for Hispanics is probably higher, perhaps by a considerable margin. In an interim survey, pending the next full census in 2010, the Census Bureau in 2004 calculated the figure as now over 40 million. Of these some 24 millions are US-born, with 16 million born outside the United States. The state with the highest proportion of Hispanic population is New Mexico, but California, Texas and Florida also show percentages in excess of 20 per cent. There is now no state, from Alabama to Alaska, which does not have a sizeable Hispanic population. The fastest growth is not in fact in the Hispanic Southwest, but in parts of the old Confederacy which until recently had few Spanish speakers. Thus Georgia has a Hispanic population of over seven per cent, not enormous it might be said, but a vast increase on the state's Hispanic population just a few years ago. Other states in the Deep South show the same trend with North Carolina's Hispanic population being now also around seven per cent, a quantum leap from a decade earlier. The Hispanic population in states such as these is calculated to be increasing by almost 20 per cent per year. These changes are very visible throughout the American South, a place which 20 or even 10 years ago had no Hispanic presence. Hispanic (which really means Mexican in this region) restaurants are springing up, Mexican food is available in the supermarkets, the Catholic Church is being revitalised in states such as South Carolina in which it has a long history but has always constituted a small minority (Kochhar *et al.*, 2005).

Despite the language's numerical strength, provision for teaching Spanish to children of Spanish-speaking parents has been patchy. Most states are reluctant to encourage bilingual education, and even where such a thing exists it often is bilingual only in name, being better characterised as an effort to help immigrant children learn English so that they can do regular schoolwork with their English-speaking classmates and receive an equal educational opportunity (Henderson *et al.*, 1994). In many instances students with a high degree of proficiency in Spanish are placed in the same Beginners Spanish class as anglophone students with no family background in the language. It would be idle to pretend that this policy is universally unpopular with the Hispanic student. Many are happy to be so placed, since they have the idea that their Spanish is somehow defective – they often say they want to learn 'proper Spanish'. While this may very well be so, that deficiency is not remedied by

sitting in a Beginners Spanish class. Other Hispanics argue that it is only fair that they should be permitted to coast through a Spanish class when the English class is so difficult for them. Many high schools and colleges are now designing courses specifically oriented to Hispanic students of Spanish. These courses are known by such titles as Spanish for Heritage Speakers or Spanish for Native Speakers. They focus on remedial work, attempting to extirpate common Spanish spelling errors and non-standard or dialectal forms, as well as offering opportunities for mastering a range of registers in the language. Generally, Hispanic students, be they Spanish-speaking or English dominant, tend to score lower than the peer norm in mathematics and science. Drop out rates are higher, being especially high for undocumented aliens (ERIC, 2001).

Immigration to the United States has always been characterised by a fairly rapid adoption of English and a concomitant loss of proficiency in the language(s) of the immigrant group. Historically, except for tiny examples such as the German of the Pennsylvania Dutch, no language other than English has lasted for more than two generations. In the case of Spanish, this process has been blocked by the continued influx of large number of Spanish speakers each year. If the tap of immigration were turned off, however, there is no reason to doubt that Spanish would go the way of Italian, German, Polish, Japanese and so on, all save one – English – of the languages which were brought to America by millions of immigrants, only to wither away after a couple of generations. There are grounds for believing that the language is not being transmitted intergenerationally in the United States. Reports from Florida indicate that teachers of Spanish now have to be recruited from out of state, many of them people of non-Hispanic or anglophone background. Hispanic students with names like Ramirez and Gonzalez are thus being taught Spanish by teachers with names like Kelly or Hoffman (Ariza, 1998). While there seems little prospect of the Hispanic tap being turned off, if newly arrived Spanish-speakers, often undocumented aliens, are the main source for priming up the numbers of Spanish-speakers, the language will continue to be seen as that of the gardeners, home helpers, restaurant workers and so on. The number of Hispanics in the United States who have no significant knowledge of Spanish is 10 million or more and the proportion of non-Spanish speaking Hispanics is in fact set to increase in the coming years. The Pew Hispanic Center predicts that the Hispanic population will grow, by as many as a million a year, but that as much as half of this will come from second-generation Hispanics rather than direct immigration. These native-born Hispanics, the children of those arrived in the great wave of the 1980s, will be English-speaking, or at least English favouring bilingual. And their children will be English monolingual. One only needs to sit in the Arrivals Section of airports such as Caracas or Bogota around Christmas to see the embodiment of the statistics in the forms of real people. Families arrive back from the United States to spend Christmas in the birthplace of the parents. The American-born children are greeted by grandparents and uncles and aunts, but remain sheepishly silent, unable to carry on a conversation in Spanish.

In any case it is by no means evident that a majority of Hispanic parents want their children to receive 'bilingual' education, however defined. A significant part of the 60 per cent majority which passed Proposition 227 in California,

effectively ending that state's bilingual education programme, appears to have been Hispanic. A similar majority of Hispanics voted in favour of Arizona's even more restrictive Proposition 203 (Wright, 2005). There are variations within the Hispanic population, with Puerto Rican parents being most favourably disposed towards a strong element of Spanish language in their children's schooling, Cuban parents being inclined to stress rapid acquisition of English. There is the common belief that the child should learn English in school, because he will learn Spanish in the home. This is a certain recipe for language decline. An interesting difference between Hispanic parents and those of other ethnic groups is that there is little development of a network of voluntary mother tongue classes for Spanish – perhaps held on Saturday mornings and taught by volunteers – such as one will commonly see for Chinese, Korean, Yiddish or Hebrew.

Bilingualism is not a two-way street in the United States. Though speakers of other languages learn to use English, few people from the English-speaking culture reciprocate. In fact, when 'Spanish' words seep into the current English language, they come in the form of pseudo-Spanish, terms such as 'cheapo', 'no problemo', etc., what has been called 'junk Spanish' (Hill, 1993). 'Spanglish' is Spanish influenced by English; there is no corresponding word for English influenced by Spanish, in fact such a thing scarcely exists in the United States. There is a perception in Europe that the United States is moving towards becoming a bilingual society. Despite sporadic signs to the contrary, however, the United States remains a predominantly monolingual society, or at least one in which languages other than English are marginalised. True, millions of people are bilingual, be it in English-Spanish, English-Chinese or whatever, but that bilingualism comes from the non-English speaker learning English, very seldom the other way around. It remains most uncommon for anglophone parents to enrol their children in Spanish bilingual classes, and the system does not encourage it (Fortune & Jorstad, 1996). It would be rare for people of English-speaking heritage to carry out any extended social or professional transactions through the medium of Spanish. It would be highly unusual for a person, other than Spanish-oriented professionals such as teachers of the language, translators, etc., to read a Spanish-language newspaper or watch TV in Spanish. Apart from in the largest cities, there are few private businesses offering Spanish or any other language instruction on a commercial or specialist basis. There is no tradition of Berlitz or similar establishments, and no apparent demand for private enterprise to take over part of the job of teaching Spanish. Anglos (and of course this term covers all English-speakers, not just those of Anglo-Saxon heritage) show little desire to collaborate in making the United States a bilingual society. Only one of the 50 states – New Mexico – recognises Spanish as an official language in addition to English, and this is based more on the state's history than on any current attitudes. In an article entitled 'The Hispanic Challenge', the influential commentator Samuel P. Huntington raised the spectre of a Hispanic threat to the values and culture of the United States (Huntington, 2004). The 2006 controversy over 'Nuestro Himno', a new Spanish-language version of 'The Star-Spangled Banner', was quite revealing of attitudes – many Anglos objected to the promotion of the Spanish version (David 2006). There have been many



efforts to copper-fasten the position of English. Adherents of the group known as US English believe that this should be declared the official language of the country, and call for the prohibition of the use of other languages in public situations such as voting or doing business with state or federal governments. Ironically perhaps, the Chairman of US English is Mauro Mujica, an immigrant from Chile (US English, 2007). Bills to declare English the official language of the nation have been proposed from time to time in Congress, the latest case in June 2007. By a margin of 2-1 the US Senate passed an amendment, the S.I. Hayakawa National Language Amendment Act, to make English the national language of the United States and reduce the entitlement to multilingual services. However, the measure was to be part of the General Immigration Reform Bill, which failed to win support and was thus abandoned. None of the legislative initiatives has had a huge impact, because once passed they get mired down in a morass of civil rights and free speech actions in the courts. The cause of bilingualism has not been helped, it must be said, by heavy-handed federal interventions, such as requirements that anglophone teachers attend sensitivity training if they are to keep their jobs, or very questionable use of the term 'Hispanic' in Equal Opportunity employment practices, for example (Crawford, 1992; Mishory, 2006). People often ask why should, for example, the son of an Argentinean surgeon working in a US hospital get the equal opportunity benefits accruing to Hispanics, while the son of the Anglo janitor in the same hospital gets no such favours.

A comprehensive description of the status of Spanish in the United States would require a far longer study than has been offered here. Separate essays would be required to deal with topics such as the Spanish-language media, Spanish in the popular culture and Spanish in the legal system. This paper has put forward evidence that, while the Spanish language in the United States enjoys health in terms of gross numbers, American society gives no indication of moving towards bilingualism.

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