

## **BILINGUALISM IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. THE *GLOSSOLALIA* ISSUE**

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***Abstract:** The present paper analyses the bilingualism issue within the framework of the United States of America laying emphasis upon the concept of 'glossolalia', 'the speaking in tongues', a way of elevating language, a means of creating a foreign language, acquiring a language, which is a socially determined phenomenon. Bilingualism must be perceived as both a societal and individual concern, due to the fact that languages bilinguals speak affect each other in various ways so much that there is a regular study of what happens when two languages come into contact. The focus is laid on the main ethnic minorities, their past and present place in the society as well as the degree to which they have been integrated in the American culture and civilization.*

***Key words:** bilingualism, glossolalia, speaking in tongues, language, society, culture, America.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

*Glossolalia* is another way of elevating language, a way of creating a foreign language, so to speak. It is interesting that this phenomenon does not occur in Judaism, which uses archaic Hebrew for worship.

An unusual religious discourse activity is *speaking in tongues* known scientifically as *glossolalia*. This is unusual because the utterances are not in a recognizable language.

Acquiring a language is very much a socially determined phenomenon. No child can learn an oral language without hearing one speaking.

### **2. INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL BILINGUALISM**

Many people speak more than one language. They may have different levels of proficiency in each of their languages and use them for very different social situations. The languages that bilinguals speak affect each other in various ways, so much that there is a regular study of what happens when one language comes into contact with another.

In some countries, one or more languages are being abandoned and many have disappeared.

In the United States, many assume that every person usually speaks a language, the language of his or her country, being usual to speak two or more languages in the same country.

Bilingualism is both a societal and an individual concern. Although the United States is usually considered a monolingual nation, it has never been actually.

The United States plays the role of the home to Spanish, Italian, German, French, Polish, Yiddish, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Russian, Greek, Chinese, Filipino languages, Portuguese, Japanese, Korean, Navajo, and Vietnamese.

Grosjean [3] took this list from a 1976 United States government survey. That survey did not pick up other languages that were spoken in this country in 1976, and are still spoken such as Ukrainian, Armenian, Finnish, different languages from India and Africa, Native American (NA) languages other than the Navajo, and several varieties of Arabic. There are also a small number of speakers who

have retained the languages of their native Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia.

Since the 1976 survey, several other Southeast Asian languages have been adopted to the pot, especially Hmong, Loatian, Mien, and Cambodian.

Not only are the languages different from each other, but also the cultures of the people who speak them.

As a result of the great cultural differences, often Southeast Asians have not been assimilated as well as other non-English speaking groups, including Hispanics.

There are many questions regarding the impact of bilingualism on different societies, as well as the impact of a certain society on its speakers of these languages and on the languages themselves.

How many will survive alongside English, and what problems might they pose for the educational system?

During the greatest waves of immigration, foreign-speaking children have been expected to learn English on their own. Anyway, children were usually English-speaking, in order to be assimilated into the American culture.

Nowadays, there is bilingual education for children who are immigrants, but language retention is not an insignificant issue.

When people loose the language of their culture, their families' ties can be weakened as well as their religious ties and their sense of ethnic identity and community.

When two languages come into contact, they inevitably affect each other. In the most extreme cases, languages known as Creoles are formed from the languages in contact, resulting in a new language which is a combination or blending of two or more parent languages.

Many scholars believe that the many varieties of Black speech in the United States and the Caribbean resulted from the marriage between various African languages and English, Spanish, or French. This is an example of *societal change*.

Creoles are developed, learned and spoken by entire segments of a society.

During former President Carter's visit to Poland, a United States government translator

embarrassed the president by mistranslating the verb 'desire', the Polish word for *sexual desire, lust*, choosing an inappropriate word translatable by one meaning of English *desire*.

The Polish have a completely separate word for English *desire* in the sense of 'would like to' as in 'we desire (would like to) be friends' and English happens to attach both meanings to one word and Polish does not.

In some American cities there are Jewish bakeries that sell corn bread. Americans, even those who are Jewish, often think that such bread is made entirely of corn meal. But it is made from rye, one of the grains called 'korn' in Yiddish.

In older English, corn also meant *rye* as well as other grains.

*'Often general words, words without very specific semantic features are translated from one language to another. For instance, the Pennsylvania Dutch say, "It gives rain" under the influence of "es gebt rejje". If a bilingual's original language has a word that sounds like one in their second language but has a different meaning, frequently that word will adopt the meaning of the new language. This has been the fate of the Italian "fattoria", which in America means factory but in Italian meant "farm". Greek "karry", now "car" originally meant "wagon". American Portuguese "pinchar" now means "pinch" as well as its original "jump" [2].*

Thus, 'English words have crept into virtually all the immigrant languages. Florida Spanish developed "pelota de fly" for "fly ball". American German has "fleisch pie" for "meat pie". Mexican- American boys can be very "tufo" (tough) as they race cars with tires that are "eslika" silk. A car has a "breca" brake, "bomper" "bumper", and "guipa" wiper. To be out of control is "esta de control" [2].

Transferring a word from one language to another is not difficult.

### 3. MAINTAINING BILINGUALISM

There is a question that often arises in the mind of many linguists and sociologists regarding the impact and the importance of bilingualism, if it changes the words of the

mind, or if it makes one more intelligent, better to think in one way.

Some claim that knowing two languages allows one to think in two separate systems and there is another belief that one's language influences the thinking.

Recent studies indicate that there are benefits of bilingualism and also different degrees of bilingualism.

There are perhaps few bilinguals capable to speak very fluently two languages, and even if they are equally proficient, they may speak each of their languages only in different social situations or even switch languages in one social situation.

In order to decide if bilingualism confers mental flexibility or any other benefit, one has to test speakers who are equally good in both languages and who are of the same social class and age group.

But for an adult, it is difficult to learn another language, based on the first language, typically resulting a foreign accent and errors in discourse, syntax and vocabulary.

There is a clear evidence that such foreign accents have left permanent marks in American English pronunciation, although words from many immigrant groups have been adopted.

Immigrants who came to America in their 20s may still speak with an extremely thick accent when they are in their seventies, foreign accents being caused by the misperception of sounds.

Speakers seem to hear the sounds in a new language through a filter of their own language, converting new sound to one already in their linguistic repertoire that shares some features.

Many Germans who resettled in America during the 1930s and '40s still say '*zis sing*' for '*this thing*'.

Uriel Weinreich pointed this out in his study entitled *Languages in Contact* [8]. For instance, his grandmother always spoke of '*washing her hairs*', she always put her hand '*in the pocket*' and not '*in her pocket*' and she often complained '*I'm waiting since four hours*'. All of these were transferred from her native language.

Another factor may also interfere. Speakers

remember semantic content or lexical choices, not the syntactic form.

People do not always notice the syntax that another person is using to encode an idea and much of the so-called bilingual interference perhaps proceeds from the same cause.

To a certain degree, one reason for the loss of many languages of different groups is that the variety they spoke was associated with poverty, persecutions and even ignorance and when the language was taught in schools, it was the standard dialect, not the one the immigrants themselves brought with them.

The larger the community of speakers of a given language, the longer the language is likely to be retained. In earlier decades, in regions with large populations of non-English speakers, business, social and church matters were often not conducted in English. Over time, except for Spanish, there has been a steady erosion of non-English languages in the United States.

It has already been noticed that foreign languages survive best where there are large enough populations so that daily social activities can be carried on in that language.

The population of the German neighborhoods of Chicago, for instance, decreased from about 161,000 to around 99,000 in the ten years from 1960 to 1970. Despite the existence of German shops, churches, radio programs, children's singing groups, soccer teams, clubs, the language is less and less spoken, but language retention in the United States is not only a matter of losing immigrant languages, but also the Native American Languages. Southwest Hispanics were there when the English came.

Southwest Spanish speakers avoided using Spanish terms whenever they could, even terms that Anglo-Americans typically use like '*corral*', '*lariat*', '*frijoles*', and '*chaps*'. If they had to pronounce a Spanish word, even their own names, they would anglicize it, a behavior present in other cultures as well.

Yiddish speakers anglicized their names of their foods, so in New York City, '*kishke*', a kind of sausage, became '*stuffed derma*'.

People with Yiddish names americanized them so that 'Bayla' became 'Bella' and 'Tible' became 'Toby'.

The very large number of Spanish speakers in the United States is one of the reasons for which language is not dying out: Southwest Spanish speakers in Arizona, Texas, and California, and the Puerto Ricans and Cubans in the East, but there are now Spanish speakers from South America, such as those from Columbia, and others from Central America.

The need for Spanish bilingual professionals is very great: Spanish-speaking physicians, nurses, lawyers, teachers, and social workers. In these days, international business and financial institutions also need Spanish-English bilinguals. Moreover, Spanish is the second most widely spoken language in the world.

Except for Native American languages, no other language has as much legitimacy as Spanish has in the Southwest, a legitimacy conferred because the Spanish speakers were there before the English and in many states Spanish is not truly an immigrant language.

The Louisiana and French-Canadian speakers also have as much historical justification as do the English speakers. Nowadays, in the United States those who speak French usually also speak English.

The non-dominant language leaves traces in the dominant one in names for food, geographical features, and other common words.

Many Spanish words have entered American English like 'mesa', 'canyon', 'tostada', 'nada' and even 'amigo'. This can happen with non-native languages as well.

#### 4. NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGES

Ironically, the original inhabitants of America, the Native Americans (NAs), commonly called Indians, were never able to claim their languages after the Europeans colonized their territories.

Many people think of NAs as being a monolithic group. Actually, different tribes with very different cultures and languages

extended from Maine to Florida, Alaska to California, and all points between these regions.

It is estimated that there were between 500 to 1000 separate languages spoken in America north of Mexico. Each family has or had several separate languages and dialects.

A language family is a group of languages that can be shown to have been separate from one common language.

For instance, the Algonquin family included several languages spoken throughout central Canada, the Great Lakes, parts of the Southwest, and the Eastern seaboard with two distant relatives in California.

When Europeans came, saw and conquered the New World, they were not interested in the NA languages. Besides this, the conquered people were far more primitive both in social organization and technology than were the conquerors. Consequently, many NA languages disappeared with their tribes.

According to the 1970 census, there were estimated 764,000 NAs in the United States, belonging to about 150 distinct cultures. Most of these were English-speaking and only 34 percent reported an NA or Eskimo language as their first language. The Aleuts, Eskimos, and NAs in Alaska have maintained their language. About 82 percent of the Crows in Montana speak their language as a mother tongue.

#### 5. OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Despite the extensive bilingualism in the United States, for official purposes, so to speak, it is essentially a monolingual country.

English is the official language of the land for all purposes. A unified country requires that one language be understood and used by everyone.

While traveling in Florida, one sees stickers like 'one language, one country'. All over the country, English speakers resent laws requiring bilingual education, bilingual notices and bilingual directions.

Americans certainly feel that if immigrants are going to come there, their national identity, and civil rights shall be affected and shall undergo many changes.

In California, Arizona, Texas and New Mexico, Anglos forget that they are the immigrants.

And Spanish speakers settled those states first and obviously everyone forgets about the Native Americans.

Even a country like the United States has no law proclaiming that English must be its official language. Laws are written in English, the courts are conducted in English, as well as classrooms.

Official languages are needed both for government and education. But language is a very personal and emotional issue.

Because of the problems caused by multilingualism in new nations, some linguists and sociolinguists have become involved in language planning.

Before a language is made official, it requires a very careful study, in order to determine the attitudes toward it. Planners must decide what languages will be employed in elementary schools.

It must be one that will not repulse natives, one that is easily spoken in different social situations, including school and business.

Choosing official languages must take potential problems into account. How can be these languages preserved as means of communication even if another must be made official for other reasons, and what is its role?

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Multiculturalism as a process represented, it represents and will remain the most important element, and complex 'engine' of a society and of the world itself.

In the United States of America, multiculturalism is not an official policy at the federal level, but according to William Haviland [5], at the state level, it is sometimes associated with English-Spanish bilingualism.

Many different nations, cultures, ideologies, aspirations, educational levels, skin colors, language heritages, all these elements have always created differences and racial conflicts.

In a country that is multiethnic and multicultural, a bilingual and multilingual

country, racial inequality and intolerance are likely to exist.

Multiculturalism represents a positive and essential element of today's American society.

Multiculturalism is the term which recognizes values and celebrates cultural diversity.

It accepts and respects the right of all people to express and promote their individual cultural heritage, within a shared commitment to that country, and the basic structures and values of democracy.

The term *multiculturalism* describes the cultural and ethnic diversity of the contemporary world.

The United States of America is and will remain a culturally diverse country trying to promote this diversity which is a positive aspect of society. Such a cultural diverse society also means a linguistically rich society.

The *melting pot* attitude did not require a detailed knowledge of American history, acquisition of a complex cultural heritage.

It allowed interest in the culture of a country of origin, and family ties with that particular country [6].

All human behavior originates in the use of symbols, an opinion that all anthropologists share. Art, religion, and money involve symbols. The Christian cross, the Jewish Star of David, or many objects of worship may bring to mind centuries of struggle, they may stand for a whole philosophy or creed.

But the most important symbolic aspect of culture is language, the use of words for objects. Through language, humans are able to transmit culture from one generation to another.

In particular, language makes it possible to learn from shared experiences.

Bilingualism in the United States of America must be perceived as both a societal and individual concern.

It is worth to mention that every single individual must accept and understand the ethnic minorities, their past and present place in society as well as the degree to which they have been integrated in the American culture and civilization, thus understanding the transformations of any kind, especially

linguistic and demographic ones, which inevitably lead to a social and linguistic development.

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