

Doesn't everyone speak English anyway?

Multilingualism in the Age of Globalization

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This past spring, a concerned group of Wellesley, Massachusetts parents raised enough money—\$380,000—to keep alive for another year the school district's second-language immersion education program, which had failed to secure continued funding through a May tax bill. "Kids need foreign language to compete in today's economy"¹ was the voiced opinion of one of the parents who backed the program, confirming a common perception that in an increasingly globalized world, the ability to communicate in another language besides one's own is not only perceived as being advantageous, but essential. The school board ruled, however, that the Spanish immersion program was academic by nature and not an extra-curricular or enrichment program, projects that are typically pioneered and funded by PTO groups. Therefore, the school board rejected the funding: a second language program and teachers' salaries, they concluded, were too central to the core academic curriculum to be funded by a parents' group and not by the voting citizens of the community. The immersion program will be cancelled.

A number of intriguing issues are raised by this case: public vs. private funding of education, the definition of essential versus extra-curricular school programs, bilingual versus immersion programs, parental involvement in school policy issues, etc. For the purposes of this present discussion, we shall focus on what is a surprisingly complex issue for American English speakers in an increasingly Americanized and English-speaking world: what is the place or even the necessity of multilingualism in a globalized world, and where lies the importance of knowing languages and of learning about the world through languages? Is the Wellesley parent correct that in today's globalized economy, it is important that our citizens learn to speak the many languages of the world, or should we simply rely on the growing importance (some would say dominance) of English to "get by" in a constantly more homogenized world? While multiple

studies show that the study of a second language (any second language) results in higher test scores,² and while speaking a second language can give one an edge in a tight job market, these "benefits" may not seem essential in an age of school budget cuts and accountability testing. In a country clearly ambivalent (though I believe not hostile) to bilingualism, few question the virtues or value of speaking a second or third language. Yet multilingualism has clearly not taken root as an essential national imperative, despite growing concerns over the current geopolitical situation and the indisputable internationalization of everyday life.

The time seems right to reorient the question: how can we begin to imagine ourselves within a broader globalized community in which we are citizens of an integrated space which crosses national boundaries, a globalized community which concomitantly respects and celebrates cultural diversity and difference? A tall order, but one that is knocking at the door of every citizen of the 21st century, and one that openly questions the almost institutionalized monolingualism of the United States in the 20th century. At present, there is greater linguistic diversity in the U.S. than at any other historic period, and more Americans than ever are learning a foreign language. In a sense, not only does monolingualism limit the numerous possibilities offered by a diverse globalized world, but it also keeps the country from maximizing the domestic resources within its own borders. Undoubtedly, the world is acquiring competence in English in order to be able to participate and compete in the areas of commerce, tourism, security and technology, to name just a few of the more obvious fields. But this rudimentary competence, which we invariably demand as much from our international counterparts as from newly arrived immigrants, does not necessarily guarantee meaningful interaction. Consequently, communication and understanding are limited to only the most basic level of communicatory

¹ Lisa Keen and Tracy Jan, "Town Rejects \$380,000 from Parents for Program," *The Boston Globe* May 27, 2005.

² See Elizabeth L. Webb, "The Effect of Second Language Learning on Test Scores, Intelligence and Achievement: An annotated bibliography," <http://www.mctlc.org/newvisions/legscores.html>.

speech acts, lacking the possibility of meaningful mutual understanding. If you want to learn about a culture and understand it, learn to speak the language. I doubt that many would strongly oppose this axiom, yet few feel the urgency of its message. Interestingly, it seems to be women who are listening to the call to multilingualism and considering its centrality in a global society, as advanced language and literature classes are becoming more populated by women students. What does this say about gender roles, and is it problematic that men are choosing to end their second-language experience before achieving fluency?

In May 2003, the award-winning and highly respected actor Meryl Streep spoke at a rainy commencement ceremony in Cowell Stadium to the UNH graduating class of 2003. She recalled the idealism and resolve that characterized the group of women who made up her incoming class in the early 1970s at Dartmouth College and that were integrating the formerly all-male campus. She pointed out that now, thirty years later, women are the strong majority on the campuses of most colleges and universities across the United States. Yet, as she went on to note for us, “the glass ceiling is still in effect in the business world, professions and politics.”¹ Women comprise about three of every four undergraduate majors in foreign languages, while certain fields in the “hard” sciences still house a masculine majority: for example, engineering schools are granting about 85 percent of their undergraduate degrees to men.² What does it mean in terms of future career paths when educational fields are recognizably differentiated by gender? Is it the intangibility factor of certain fields like foreign language study that leads task- and goal-oriented individuals to study more pragmatic fields? It seems to me that this situation, evident in the education realm, is leading to a widening gap in the globalized world between (cultural) value and (material) pragmatics.

At the present time of global conflict and increased violence, it seems more and more necessary that we better prepare ourselves to understand other peoples and cultures. Yet the stakes go far beyond language expertise for national security reasons. While it is understandable that there has been a rush at many private and public institutions to finance new security-related programs—area and language studies, for instance—it could be posited that these measures are a belated effort to deal with

a geopolitical situation that a great number of Americans find clearly incomprehensible. Will learning foreign languages and expanding our knowledge of foreign cultures avoid future strife? It just might.

There are presently extensive and complex international networks that exist among countless citizens, links that exist on multiple levels, personally, socially, but also and increasingly, professionally. Numerous professionals are already largely tied to a global community: area experts, teachers, technicians, researchers, persons in the medical field, negotiators, diplomats, commercial experts and business people, public servants, social workers, etc. It is these very people working in extremely diverse fields that on multiple fronts and on a daily basis maintain direct and crucial relations with people of different cultures from all across the world, and whose ability to maximize their own performance in their field relies on critical and complex communication with the international community. As one can see from the previous and by no means exhaustive list, almost no field (nor for that matter any geographic region) is untouched by the effects and demands of a globalized world. It could be that these crucial transnational links, these constant communications and mutual projects—many of which are happening at a micro-level—are the very ones which prevent disastrous political tensions from arising, or which can help to resolve conflicts through multiple and extremely diffuse networks of communication. Notice that diversifying (rather than consolidating and polarizing) our cultural networks may be the mechanism by which conflicts can be diffused, or resolved, or ultimately, avoided.

A global village. Cultural diversity. Celebrate difference. Cultural imperialism. Global superpower. “McDomination.” Cultural and economic dependency. These buzzwords and phrases capture very different perceptions of the globalizing process. Undoubtedly, globalization can be framed both as a promise and a threat, and often in the same breath. On the one hand we can think of globalization as collaboration, as collective processes, as hybrid fusions, the free exchange of ideas and creations, fertile transculturations, the opening of economic, social and political alliances. On the other hand, it is also perceived as leading to cultural and economic imperialism, the monopolization by multinational corporations of the marketplace, the loss of

1 Meryl Streep, University of New Hampshire Commencement Address, May 24, 2003.

2 See Myra and David Sadker, *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls*, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1995, pp. 165-166.

rich cultural distinctiveness, the destruction of local cultures and economies, the imposition of dull cultural uniformity, and the polarization of the world population into the haves and have-nots. When a new Wal-Mart begins construction within several thousand meters of the Pyramids of the Moon and Sun in Teotihuacan, Mexico, it is not just the local Mexicans that read the jarring clash between the site of an ancient civilization with the world's largest company as a symbolic struggle between a nation's cultural heritage and the retail company who is perhaps the leading figure of globalization, corporate monopoly and transnational commerce. Some local "Teotihuacanos" may welcome what they perceive as a potential increase in job opportunities in the area or the availability of cheaper products, while non-locals can be those most protesting the intrusion of the massive enterprise as an affront to native Mexican culture. I have heard the laments from students returning from travels abroad who come across a McDonald's in the middle of a quaint village, while on the other hand, most of my friends would celebrate the arrival of a new Thai or Ethiopian restaurant in the seacoast area of New Hampshire, or would be the first to buy tickets to hear a rap-reggae fusion group visiting from Jamaica. What remains undetermined is who are the arbiters that define whether globalization leads to cultural diversity or further exploitation, whether it offers opportunities or threatens local life.

In many respects, globalization seems to imply movement in two directions: toward increasing simplification (monolingualism, the globalization of sameness and imperial domination) while alternately toward intricate complexity (the contact of multiple languages and cultures, the economic diversification of the marketplace, the participation of new groups in the global economy, and cultural diversity and multiplicity). It is not always the have-nots who fear globalization's effects, nor is globalization always just a one-way street of the imposition of Americanized uniformity across a powerless and vulnerable global landscape. It is becoming clearer that "culture," in all its nebulous manifestations, is no longer a protected resource within a national domain, but rather, an exchangeable and mobile commodity, open to the free market system of supply and demand. In a sense, the national no longer serves as the foundation of a given language or a certain culture, nor that which can sufficiently define, defend or ground itself through and by it. Instead, we, as "citizens of the world," can be increasingly free to choose our cultural experiences and

the language in which we express them... or not. The Wellesley PTO is correct in recognizing the value of foreign languages in creating better and more successful "citizens of the world." But the school board is also correct in sensing that languages, if they are genuinely going to enrich our culture and become part of its fabric, cannot be simply bought as yet another commodity from the global menu. Globalization can open possibilities, or it can close down diversity. Can we choose to break out of the monolingual and uni-cultural straight-jacket of an Americanized-globalized uniformity? And must we?