The Unofficially Official Language of our Nation

Language is something that we all take for granted. We start our journey with it as stumbling babies, where the only language we can share with the world around us is limited to laughing or crying, happiness or sadness. We then move into childhood and adolescence and learn to mind our manners and say “please” and “thank you.” It isn’t until most of us are well into adulthood that we realize that language isn’t just how we communicate with others, but that it can serve the purpose of getting us what we want if we utilize it correctly. We can use it to persuade and compliment others, yet we can also use it as a powerful weapon used to oppress them and make them feel insignificant. The English language in the United States is considered the language of authority, the tool used to implement what is right and wrong in our society. English is the “professional” option, and any other languages are irrelevant and incompetent.

However, what Americans fail to understand is that it isn’t merely some “foreign” language that they are discriminating against, but also the traditions and culture that the language carries with it. In dominant communities, such as Anglo-Americans in the United States, ethnic languages are often undermined and brushed to the side. The choice is thought to be black or white; you are either one of us or you aren't. You either speak English, or you don’t. Literacy in one language or lack thereof does not equate to intelligence, and we must uplift the many different languages and identities we see instead of oppressing them. Language isn’t a simple concept and understanding the importance of different life perspectives in our country can help us speak up and protect our differences while strengthening our identity as a nation of many languages.

To dive deeper into the significance of recognizing minority languages, we must acknowledge a specific population living in the United States who have a unique experience of the effects of an imperial language on minority languages. It’s those who grew up in homes
where a different language was spoken besides English, those who grew up in homes like mine. I knew my relationship with English was different from those around me starting in elementary school. Unlike my peers, I would get pulled out of class every week to meet with a teacher who would help me improve my English skills. “Point to the apple. Okay, now to the car. Great! How about the bike?” I would complain every time I had to go, I mean, how dumb did they think I was to not be able to recognize a picture of an apple? The mandatory Spanish classes weren’t any more stimulating, though. Every Wednesday, we would head to a Spanish class with a so-called Señorita Caughman who would teach us basic numbers, words, and sayings in standard Spanish. I quickly found that achieving success in that class wouldn't be an option for me, as raising my hand to answer too much would result in a private conversation in which I was told “the other kids need a chance to participate too.” The reprimand was enough to make me never speak in class again, and I would comfort myself by saying, “I know more Spanish than this dumb white lady anyway.” As I grew older, the encounters became more common, and I came to terms with the fact that neither my Spanish nor my English would be good enough to fit anyone's standards. Over this summer a family friend told me, “Mija, se te está empeorando tu español, tienes que practicar más.” At this point, I said basta, ya no mas, I won’t take it anymore. Who are they to tell me what Spanish is right, and which is wrong? My experiences aren't unique, as Latin Americans living in the United States have had their identities questioned time and time again.

Gloria Anzaldua, a Chicana writer born in South Texas, explores the relationship that bilingualism has on one's Hispanic identity through her writing “How to Tame a Wild Tongue.” Through her work, Anzaldua analyses how Chicano Spanish is considered illegitimate in both Latin-American countries and the United States, and how in turn this robs Chicanos of the
identity that they have tied to their language. She elaborates on the fact that living in the United States doesn’t mean you have to be one (American) or the other (Hispanic) to thrive, but instead, encourages the idea of a fluid identity that is constructed based on one’s personal experiences. As Chicanos, we aren’t accepted in the American world unless we can speak English with no immigrant accent, to show we are capable of being educated and worthy of a future. However, we aren’t accepted by Latinos either since “Chicano Spanish is considered by the purist and by most Latinos deficient, a mutilation of Spanish” (Anzaldua 35). To them, our Spanish is ugly and “mocho” or messed up. But it’s exactly this that makes our Spanish so powerful. We don’t need to adhere to Latino or Anglo mindsets, because we are a living embodiment of the future. The influence of both languages is combined to create something entirely new that gives us the power to speak about our experiences and of those who don’t have a voice to do so. It is a language of evolution, and it gives strength to all Hispanics in the United States as we realize that we do have a legitimate dialect we can call our own. We need to realize that “until [we] can take pride in [our] language, [we] cannot take pride in [ourselves]” (39). We can’t allow someone to speak lowly about our language, as in doing that they are rejecting our entire being. From this point forward, it is essential to fight back and realize that we have the power to create our own dialect, our own language, because it belongs to us, and will continue to evolve with us.

As “Chicanos”, we are fluent in two languages, a feat that is a lot more difficult for older generations to achieve. Whenever you don’t speak the dominant tongue, you have no choice but to put up with the unfair treatment you receive because your identity is considered inferior. Sometimes, people’s intentions with their words are easily deciphered, as when my mother got told by an elderly woman at goodwill, “this is America, yuh speak English here!” Other times their hatred is masked behind well-seeming intentions, as when my “Tica” roommate got asked
if she understood the reading that had been assigned in class, considering that English wasn’t her first language. Oftentimes, the victims of harassment are immigrants who have prioritized other factors in their life over learning to speak English. Amy Tan, a Chinese American writer, tells us about the experiences of her mother living in the United States as someone who speaks very minimal English in “Mother Tongue”. The short essay helps show how difficult it is to be taken seriously as someone who lacks the ability to communicate with those around them and how society, and even their own children, often think less of them because of it. Tan beautifully portrays the embarrassment we feel as the children of immigrants as she “believed that her mothers English reflected the quality of what she had to say” which is to say that “because [her mom] expressed [her words] imperfectly her thoughts were imperfect” (Tan). Time and time again, I felt embarrassed because waiters couldn’t understand my father’s order and I would quickly try to translate for him. I would help my mom read the paperwork that would arrive in the mail and fail to understand it myself at 7 years old. Amy Tan reminded me that my parent's abilities aren't limited to their English skills. Just because my dad couldn’t order at Applebee’s doesn’t mean he doesn’t know how to run a business or buy his own real estate. Just because my mom couldn’t understand what the letter from the bank said doesn’t mean she can’t fix your supper or become the employee of the month at her job. Like Anzaldua’s work, Tan shows that literacy isn’t limited to only literacy in the English language and that we can learn something new by allowing our linguistic differences to prosper. Just because immigrants may not be able to speak or read our language fluently doesn’t mean they don’t have anything of value to share with us. If anything, we must make the effort to learn from the knowledge they can share with us and attempt to incorporate their unique skills into our community.
Unfortunately, throughout history, immigrants aren't the only ones who have been subject to the imposition of the English language. Amber Peterson, a member of the NCTE Standing Committee on Global Citizenship says that many historians propose the idea that “written language emerged at least in part as a tool for maintaining power” (Peterson). Therefore, we often hear the saying that “history is written by the victors”. In United States history, this falls in the hands of Anglo-Americans and the English-speaking population. When the settlers first arrived, they made it their mission to spread their language, even if it meant the death of other ones. In “Speaking of Nature” by Robin Kimmerer, she laments over her lost Native American language, Potawatomi. Her chances of learning the language were stolen in “Indian boarding schools where native children were forbidden to speak their own language” (Kimmerer 4). To the colonizers, the native language was just another obstacle they would have to eliminate to continue advancing forward. Even in current times, Native Americans, as the original settlers of the land, aren’t considered to be “American” but something entirely separate from our nationalism. Unlike Native Americans who were forced to learn the language, African slaves were banned from reading or writing. In the colonial era, there was a terrible fear of any slave who could read or write, for their masters were afraid that they would try to revolt or run away. Were they scared that their slaves would be able to achieve something if they had access to the same language they did? It isn’t just recently that identities are being pushed to the side, but that it is something that has been happening since the birth of our nation. Only by making amends and recognizing our wrongs will we be able to give a voice to those who have been hurt in the past by the mistakes of American ancestors.

English has long been the unofficial giant of the United States, and it’s time that we stop viewing it as such. It’s unfair to impose a language (that isn’t even the official language of the United
States) on everyone who identifies as American. America isn’t a melting pot, not everyone has to assimilate into the Anglo-American culture and let their unique identity “melt away”. Instead, let’s view it as a tossing salad, where different ingredients are incorporated together, yet they don’t lose their distinctive flavors. Like the ingredients in a salad, we are here to enhance our flavor as a country and make it welcoming for everyone who wants to be part of it, regardless of their background. We must recognize our privilege and be able to speak out for those who don’t have as broad an understanding of the world as we do, only then, will we be truly literate and be able to hear the voices of others.
Works Cited


