

WHY FEAR SPANISH?

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----- *Carlos Alberto Montaner* -----

By the mid-1990s, more than 300 languages were spoken in the United States, and it was estimated that about 32 million people spoke a language other than English at home. Some people argued that legislation to designate English as the official language of the United States government was long overdue, yet others disagreed. In the following article from *Tehe Miami Herald*, the Spanish-speaking author Carlos Alberto Montaner argues that multilingualism will not endanger America's future. He regards diverse languages as an irreplaceable "expression of cultural riches."

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Forming and Supporting Opinions

Do you agree with Montaner's argument against English-only legislation? Why or why not?

I was walking quietly with my wife on a sidewalk in Miami Beach. We were speaking Spanish, of course, because that is our language. Suddenly, we were accosted by a spry little old lady, wearing a baseball cap and sneakers, who told us: "Talk English. You are in the United States." She continued on her way at once, without stopping to see our reaction. The expression on her face, curiously, was not that of somebody performing a rude action, but of somebody performing a sacred patriotic duty.

And the truth is that the lady in question was not an eccentric madwoman. Thousands, millions of monolingual Americans are mortified that in their country there is a vast minority that constantly speaks a language that they do not understand. It disturbs them to hear Spanish prattle in shops, at work, in restaurants. They are irritated when conversations that they do not understand are held in their presence. Indeed, they are upset to stumble across Spanish-language stations on their radio or television dial, or by the fact that the *Miami Herald* occasionally includes an unsolicited supplement in the language of Castile.

Actually, the old lady's attitude was natural. Miami Beach is, more or less, the United States. And the language of the United States is English. Moreover, one of the key elements in the configuration of a nation is its language. A monolingual American who suddenly finds himself on Miami's Calle Ocho or in San Francisco's Chinatown has the feeling that he is not in his own country. And when one is not in one's own country, one feels endangered. Not faced with any danger in particular, but subject to that diffuse and irrational fear caused by words, expressions, and traits different from our own.

Hostility to a foreign language on our own turf generally does not come from balanced reflection on the advantages or disadvantages of linguistic homogeneity, but from an atavistic reaction that probably has been part of human nature for millions of years, when the differences between the groups that populated the planet might result in the death or destruction of the other. Much more recently, as far as the Greeks were concerned, barbarity flowed from ignorance of Greek. Since then—and, I fear, for all time—foreigners are inevitably considered barbarians.

All right; thus far, I have confined myself to a kindly comprehension of prejudice, but there are other factors that cannot be ignored in approaching this unhappy problem. A language is much more than a way to communicate. By one's own language—and on this Edward Sapir wrote much and well—one masters reality, one takes to oneself and understands all that exists. All: history, interpersonal relations, the most intimate and definitive emotions. For example, anybody who learns to love in one language will never be able spontaneously to translate his expressions of affection into a language acquired later.

We quarrel, are jealous, love, and hate with certain words, with certain tones, with certain inflections of the voice learned in childhood and adapted to a given set of gestures that also cannot be transported into another language. And this marching of word and message comes solely in the mother tongue. "Language," said the Spanish writer Miguel Unamuno, "is the blood of the spirit." He was right. We cannot do without our own tongue without brutally mutilating our individual consciousness, without being left without blood.

If this is so, is it reasonable to ask millions of human beings to do without this fundamental part of their lives solely so that others are not inconvenienced, or in order to comply with a few debatable rules of urbanity? Is it not more sensible and less painful to explain to monolingual Americans that to live in places where various living tongues converge can have a certain enriching enchantment, because diversity is also an expression of cultural riches?

But, what is more, American society spends thousands of millions of dollars every year in attempting unavailingly to get high school and college students to learn Spanish, because it is assumed that mastery of a second language benefits the country. If this is the rationale, then why ask the bilingual citizens present in the nation to abandon their use of that other language so covetously sought in educational establishments?

Fear of Spanish and the desire that only English be spoken in the United States do not stand up to a calm analysis of reality. The United States is and will continue to be a fundamentally English-speaking nation, but it is a fortunate fact for the country that there are other languages and other marginal cultures capable of enriching the powerful current of the mainstream. This can be perfectly understood by any American, even a monolingual one, if he is capable of savoring a Mexican taco while listening to the Miami Sound Machine's *Conga* or reading a wonderful story by Isaac Bashevis Singer written in Yiddish—very near the spot where we were berated by the irate old lady in baseball cap and sneakers.

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Source: "Why Fear Spanish?" by Carlos Alberto Montaner in *The Miami Herald*, April 25, 1988. Used by permission of the author.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Some students may agree with Montaner's argument against English-only legislation. They may cite his argument that diversity of languages is culturally beneficial, that people cannot reasonably be expected to abandon their native language since it shapes their understanding of the world, that English-speaking high school and college students are regularly taught second languages, and his observation that resistance to foreign languages is often a matter of "diffuse and irrational fear." Some students may not agree with Montaner's argument against English-only legislation. They may cite and elaborate on his observation that "one of the key elements in the configuration of a nation is its language." They may also cite popular support for English-only legislation.