

# For a linguistic policy without borders

**A** form of discrimination which has arisen anew in the United States is that relating to language. In the belief that bilingualism is the main threat to the integrity of the North American nation, ten years ago the "US English" organization was founded for the purpose of winning converts to the "English Only" movement (see *Voices of Mexico* 24, July-September 1993, pp. 17-21).

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*“Don't go to movies by Arnold Schwarzenegger, one of the founders of the 'US English' organization”*

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Those who maintain that bilingualism can cause future problems for the United States cite as an example the desire of Francophone residents of Quebec to separate from Anglophone Canada. However, it is worth recalling that Switzerland, a country which has been an example of democracy for 700 years, has four official languages, and that despite this the relations among its inhabitants are stable and harmonious.

Another case of successful linguistic diversity can be found in a young country: Australia. There, English is the language which unites the population, but the government finances and promotes bilingual education as well as providing immigrants with translation services and bilingual publications. As good pioneers, since the early 1980s the Australians have been broadcasting television programs in several languages with subtitles in English, and these programs are widely enjoyed, including by the English-speaking audience. This is a demonstration of an authentically borderless linguistic policy.

Excerpt from a presentation to the national meeting in commemoration of Cesar Chavez, as part of the round table "Politics Without Borders: New Relations Between Chicanos and Mexicans," held on October 1, 1993.

The defense of the vernacular language is not a cause of conflicts, but rather a consequence of racial, cultural and religious discrimination and intolerance. In other words, conflicts arise when that part of the population which has suffered discrimination rebels and fights to obtain the same economic, political and social opportunities as the part of the population which has discriminated against them—and not because different languages are spoken.

There have, in fact, always been polyglot societies. During the Roman Empire, Latin was not adopted by all of the conquered peoples. Nevertheless, the Romans never attempted to impose a policy of "Latin Only" and, despite the linguistic diversity of their dominions, they maintained their power for more than 500 years.

But in North American society today we can see the psychological effect which produces the equation "the predominance of a language is equal to dominance."

Anglo-Saxons living in Miami say they feel like foreigners in their own land because they hear Spanish being spoken everywhere and all the time. This may be why this city is considered the cradle of "English Only."

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*“Never buy at Sears, a company which has forbidden its employees in the United States to use any language but English”*

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The fear and determined rejection of the Spanish language on the part of Anglo-Saxons resident in Miami were manifested in July of 1980, with the formation of the Dade Citizens' Union, which in just four weeks was able to gather more than 44,000 signatures, almost twice the number required to put an anti-bilingualism referendum on the ballot that year.

The majority of those who voted for this proposition said they wanted to make Miami a less attractive place for

Cubans and other Hispanics. They did not achieve their goal. In 1980 Miami's population was one-third Hispanic, while today more than half the city's residents speak Spanish as their first language. As for the decree prohibiting the use of languages other than English, it was struck down last May.

The promoters of "English Only" in the United States seem unaware that immigrants end up adopting English as their vernacular tongue by the second or third generation.

And the social context demands this. Immigrants need to speak the language of the country where they have chosen to live, in order to gain equal conditions. But if they also take care to preserve the language of their forebears they will not only have greater opportunities but an immense cultural richness as well.

I recently heard a Chicana writer say that she uses English for everything except writing poetry and talking to God. What a pleasant surprise, since we appreciate the beauty of a language when we explore it and when we understand that in the beginning was the word.

As a last thought, I would like to remind you that geographic distance tends to create idioms. If this occurs within our own national territory, what can we expect to be

the result of greater distance and the influences which logically arise when one is in contact with another language?

The Spanish spoken by Mexican-Americans has its own idioms, which are the product of that geographical distance and cultural influence, as well as the natural evolution undergone by any language. And it is important to be aware of this so that we ourselves will not be another source of discrimination, and so as to bring about closer relations between Mexicans and Mexican-Americans.

Finally, and in tribute to that great leader Cesar Chavez, who sacrificed his own welfare and that of his family to improve the living and working conditions of farmworkers (see *Voices of Mexico* 24, pp. 81-82), I propose that we make use of a tool which he used very successfully—the boycott—in order to provide support from Mexico to our emigrants.

Two examples: never buy at Sears, a company which has forbidden its employees in the United States to use any language but English; and don't go to movies by Arnold Schwarzenegger, one of the founders of the "US English" organization, the main promoter of "English Only." ❧

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