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Against Bilingual Education

Author(s): Tom Bethell

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learning and the ancient practical wisdom of the art of mnemonics. If we take these suggestions seriously, the teaching of second languages will

become more than the mere transmission of the subject matter; it will also teach learners how to learn a second language effectively.

## *Against Bilingual Education\**

TOM BETHELL, *Harper's Magazine*

**T**HIS YEAR the United States government, which I am beginning to think is afflicted with a death wish, is spending \$150 million on "bilingual education" programs in American classrooms. There is nothing "bi" about it, however. The languages in which instruction is conducted now include: Central Yup'ik, Aleut, Yup'ik, Gwich'in, Athabaskan (the foregoing in Alaska), Navajo, Tagalog, Pima, Plaute (I promise I'm not making this up), Ilocano, Cambodian, Yiddish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Punjabi, Greek, Italian, Korean, Polish, French, Haitian, Haitian-French, Portuguese, Arabic, Crow (yes, Virginia . . .), Cree, Keresian, Tewa, Apache, Mohawk, Japanese, Lakota, Choctaw, Samoan, Chamorro, Carolinian, Creek-Seminole, and Russian.

And there are more, such as Trukese, Palauna, Ulithian, Woleian, Marshallese, Kusaian, Ponapean, and, not least, Yapese. And Spanish—how could I have so nearly forgotten it? The bilingual education program is more or less the Hispanic equivalent of affirmative action, creating jobs for thousands of Spanish teachers; by which I mean teachers who speak Spanish, although not necessarily English, it has turned out. One observer has described the HEW-sponsored program as "affirmative ethnicity." Although Spanish is only one of seventy languages in which instruction is carried on (I seem to have missed a good many of them), it accounts for 80 percent of the program.

Bilingual education is an idea that appeals to teachers of Spanish and other tongues, but also to those who never did think that another idea, the United States of America, was a particularly good one to begin with, and that the sooner it is

restored to its component "ethnic" parts the better off we shall all be. Such people have been welcomed with open arms into the upper reaches of the federal government in recent years, giving rise to the suspicion of a death wish.

THE BILINGUAL EDUCATION program began in a small way (the way such programs always begin) in 1968, when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was amended (by what is always referred to as "Title VII") to permit the development of "pilot projects" to help *poor* children who were "educationally disadvantaged because of their inability to speak English," and whose parents were either on welfare or earning less than \$3,000 a year. At this germinal stage the program cost a mere \$7.5 million, and as its sponsors (among them Sen. Alan Cranston of California) later boasted, it was enacted without any public challenge whatever.

"With practically no one paying heed," Stephen Rosenfeld wrote in the *Washington Post* in 1974 (i.e., six years after the program began),

*Congress has radically altered the traditional way by which immigrants become Americanized. No longer will the public schools be expected to serve largely as a "melting pot," assimilating foreigners to a common culture. Rather, under a substantial new program for "bilingual" education, the schools—in addition to teaching English—are to teach the "home" language and culture to children who speak English poorly.*

Rosenfeld raised the important point that "it is not clear how educating children in the language and culture of their ancestral homeland will better equip them for the rigors of contemporary life in the United States." But in re-

TOM BETHELL is a Washington editor of *Harper's Magazine*.

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sponse, a withering blast of disapproval was directed at the *Post's* "Letters" column. Hadn't he heard? The melting pot had been removed from the stove.

Bureaucratic imperative (and, I would argue, a surreptitious death wish) dictated that the \$7.5 million "pilot program" of 1968 grow into something more luxuriant and permanent. As it happened, the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Lau v. Nichols*, handed down in 1974, provided the stimulus.

In this case, Legal Services attorneys in Chinatown sued a San Francisco school district on behalf of 1,800 Chinese-speaking students, claiming that they had been denied special instruction in English. The contention that these pupils had a constitutional right to such instruction (as was implied by filing the suit in federal court) was denied both by the federal district court and the appeals court. The Justice Department entered the case when it was heard before the Supreme Court, arguing that the school district was in violation of a 1970 memorandum issued by HEW's Office for Civil Rights. This memorandum in turn was based on the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which decreed (among other things) that the recipients of federal funds cannot be discriminated against on the basis of national origin. The 1970 memorandum defined language as basic to national origin and required schools to take "affirmative steps" to correct English-language deficiencies.

Evidently intimidated by this rhetorical flourishing of "rights," the Supreme Court unanimously affirmed that federally funded schools must "rectify the language deficiency in order to open instruction to students who had 'linguistic deficiencies'." In effect, the Office for Civil Rights had taken the position that the immigrant's tongue was to be regarded as a right, not an impediment, and the Supreme Court had meekly gone along with the argument.

Armed now with this judicial mandate, HEW's civil-rights militants went on the offensive, threatening widespread funding cutoffs. No longer would the old method of teaching immigrants be countenanced (throwing them into the English language and allowing them to sink or swim). No longer! Now the righteous activists within government had exactly what they are forever searching for: a huddled mass of yearn-

ing . . . victims! Discriminated against the moment they arrive at *these* teeming, wretched, racist, ethnocentric shores!

America the Bad . . . One Nation, Full of Victims . . . Divisible. (I have in my hands an odious document, the "Third Annual Report of the National Council on Bilingual Education," which remarks that "Cubans admitted after Castro; and more recently Vietnamese refugees . . . became citizens unintentionally." No doubt they are yearning to be free to return to Ho Chi Minh City and Havana.) That's about the size of it in the 1970s, and so it came to pass that the Office for Civil Rights "targeted" 334 school districts, which would have to start "bilingual-bicultural" classes promptly or risk having their federal funds cut off.

"The OCR (Office for Civil Rights) policy is difficult to explain," Noel Epstein remarked in a thoughtful survey of bilingual education titled "Language, Ethnicity and the Schools" and published recently by the Institute for Educational Leadership. "There is no federal legal requirement for schools to provide bilingual or bicultural education." The Supreme Court had merely said that *some* remedy was needed—not necessarily bilingual education. For example, the Chinese children in the *Lau* case could have been given extra instruction in English, to bring them up to par. But the Office for Civil Rights took the position that they would have to be taught school subjects—mathematics, geography, history, et cetera—in Chinese. And the Court's ruling had said nothing at all about bicultural instruction. (This turns out to mean teaching that in any transaction with the "home" country, America tends to be in the wrong.)

In any event, the bilingual education program was duly expanded by Congress in 1974. It would no longer be just for poor children; all limited-English speakers would qualify; the experimental nature of the program was played down, and there was the important addition of biculturalism, which is summarized in a revealing paragraph in Epstein's booklet:

*Bicultural instruction was elevated to a required component of Title VII programs. The definition of "bilingual" education now meant such instruction had to be given "with appreciation for the cultural heritage of such children. . . ." This underlined the fact that language and culture were not merely being used as vehicles for the transmission of*

information but as the central sources of ethnic identity. The U.S. Civil Rights Commission had in fact urged the name of the law be changed to "The Bilingual Bicultural Education Act," but key Senate staff members blocked this idea. They feared it would "flag a potentially dangerous issue that might defeat the overall measure," Dr. Susan Gilbert Schneider reports in a valuable dissertation on the making of the 1974 act. Some lobby groups had expressed discomfort about federally sponsored biculturalism. The National Association of School Boards suggested that the legislation could be read as promoting a divisive, Canadian-style biculturalism.

It certainly could. Notice, however, the strong suggestion here that the objection was not so much to the possibility of cutting up the country, as to being *seen* to promote this possibility, which of course might defeat it. As I say, these things are best kept surreptitious—at the level of anonymous "Senate staff members."

AT THIS STAGE the bilingual seed had indeed taken root. Congressional authorizations had increased from the beggarly \$7.5 million to \$85 million in fiscal year 1975. The Office for Civil Rights was on the alert. A potential 3.6 million "victimized" children of "limited English-speaking ability" had been identified, and they would furnish the raw material for an almost endless number of bureaucratic experiments. Militant Chicanos, suddenly sought out to fill ethnic teaching quotas, stood on the sidelines, ready to pour a bucket of guilt over any old-fashioned, demurring Yankee who might raise a voice in protest.

Even so, there was a cloud on the horizon—perhaps only a conceptual cloud, but nevertheless an important one, as follows: the idea behind bilingual education was that children would begin to learn school subjects in their native tongue while they were learning English elsewhere—in special English classes, on the playground, through exposure to American society generally. But while they were in this "stage of transition"—learning English—instruction in the home tongue would ensure that they were not needlessly held back academically. Then, when they had a sufficient grasp of English, they could be removed from the bilingual classes and instructed in the normal way. That, at least, was the idea behind bilingual education originally.

But you see the problem, no doubt. At bottom, this is the same old imperialism. It is a "melting pot" solution. The children learn English after all—perhaps fairly rapidly. And at that point there is no reason to keep them in bilingual programs. Moreover, from the point of view of HEW's civil rights militants, there is rapid improvement by the "victims"—another unfortunate outcome.

The riposte has been predictable—namely, to keep the children in programs of bilingual instruction long after they know English. This has been justified by redefining the problem in the schools as one of "maintenance" of the home tongue, rather than "transition" to the English tongue. You will hear a lot of talk in and around HEW's numerous office buildings in Washington about the relative merits of maintenance versus transition. Of course, Congress originally had "transition" in mind, but "maintenance" is slowly but steadily winning the day.

The issue was debated this year in Congress when Title VII came up for renewal. Some Congressmen, alerted to the fact that children were still being instructed in Spanish, Aleut, or Yapese in the twelfth grade, tried to argue that bilingual instruction should not last for more than two years. But this proposal was roundly criticized by Messrs. Edward Roybal of California, Baltasar Corrada of Puerto Rico, Phillip Burton of California, Paul Simon of Illinois, and others. In the end the language was left vague, giving school boards the discretion to continue "bilingual maintenance" as long as they desired. Currently, fewer than one-third of the 290,000 students enrolled in various bilingual programs are significantly limited in their English-speaking ability.

Then a new cloud appeared on the horizon. If you put a group of children, let's say children from China, in a classroom together in order to teach them English, that's segregation, right? Watch out, then. Here come the civil rights militants on the rampage once again, ready to demolish the very program that they had done so much to encourage. But there was a simple remedy that would send them trotting tamely homeward. As follows: Put the "Anglos" in with the ethnics. In case you hadn't heard, "Anglo" is the name given these days to Americans who haven't got a drop of ethnicity to their names—the ones who have already been melted down, so to speak.

Putting Anglos into the bilingual program killed two birds with one stone. It circumvented the "segregation" difficulty, and—far more to the point—it meant that the Anglos (just the ones who needed it!) would be exposed to the kind of cultural revisionism that is the covert purpose behind so much of the bilingual program. Put more simply, Mary Beth and Sue Anne would at last learn the new truth: the Indians, not the cowboys, were the good guys, Texas was an ill-gotten gain, and so on.

As Congressman Simon of Illinois put it so delicately, so *surreptitiously*: "I hope that in the conference committee we can get this thing modified as we had it in subcommittee, to make clear that we ought to encourage our English-language students to be in those classes so that you can have the interplay."

As things worked out, up to 40 percent of the classes may permissibly be "Anglo," Congress decreed. And this year there has been another important change: an expanded definition of students who will be eligible for bilingual instruction. No longer will it be confined to those with limited English-speaking ability. Now the program will be open to those with "limited English proficiency in understanding, speaking, reading, and writing." This, of course, could be construed as applying to almost anyone in elementary or high school these days.

To accommodate this expansion, future Congressional authorizations for bilingual education will increase in leaps and bounds: \$200 million next year, \$250 million the year after, and so on in \$50 million jumps, until \$400 million is spent in 1983, when the program will once again be reviewed by Congress.

Meanwhile, HEW's Office of Education (that is, the *E* of HEW) appears to be getting alarmed at this runaway program. It commissioned a study by the American Institutes for Research in Palo Alto, and this study turned out to be highly critical of bilingual education. The Office of Education then drew attention to this by announcing the findings at a press conference. ("They've got it in for us," someone at the Bilingual Office told me. "Whenever there's an unfavorable study, they call a press conference. Whenever there's a favorable study, they keep quiet about it.")

In any event, the Palo Alto study claimed that children in bilingual classes were doing no better academically, and perhaps were doing slightly

worse, than children from similar backgrounds in regular English classes. The study also reported that in 85 percent of the programs, students were being kept in bilingual classes after they were capable of learning in English.

THERE HAS BEEN very little Congressional opposition to the bilingual programs, thus bearing out what the Washington writer Fred Reed has called the Guppy Law: "When outrageous expenditures are divided finely enough, the public will not have enough stake in any one expenditure to squelch it." (Reed adds, in a brilliant analysis of the problem: "A tactic of the politically crafty is to pose questions in terms of frightful virtue. 'What? You oppose a mere \$40 million subsidy of cod-pie manufacture by the Nez Percé? So! You are against Indians. . . .') The thudding opprobrium of anti-Indianism outweighs the \$40 million guppy bite in the legislators' eyes.")

Risking that opprobrium, John Ashbrook of Ohio tried to cut out the bilingual program altogether. Referring to the evidence that the program wasn't working, but the budget for it was increasing annually, Ashbrook said that "when one rewards failure, one buys failure." On the House floor he added: "The program is actually preventing children from learning English. Someday somebody is going to have to teach those young people to speak English or else they are going to become public charges. Our educational system is finding it increasingly difficult today to teach English-speaking children to read their own language. When children come out of the Spanish-language schools or Choctaw-language schools which call themselves bilingual, how is our educational system going to make them literate in what will still be a completely alien tongue. . .?"

THE ANSWER, of course, is that there will be demands not for literacy in English but for public signs in Spanish (or Choctaw, et cetera), laws promulgated in Spanish, courtroom proceedings in Spanish, and so on. These demands are already being felt—and met, in part. As so often happens, the ill effects of one government program result in the demand for another government program, rather than the abolition of the original one.

This was borne out by what happened next. When the amendment abolishing bilingual education was proposed by Ashbrook (who is usually regarded in Washington as one of those cur-

mudgeons who can be safely ignored), *not one* Congressman rose to support it, which says something about the efficacy of the Guppy Law. Instead, the House was treated to some pusillanimous remarks by Congressman Claude Pepper of Florida—a state in which it is, of course, politically unwise to resist the expenditure of federal money “targeted” for Hispanics. Pepper said: “Now there is something like parity between the population of the United States and Latin America. My information is that by the year 2000 there probably will be 600 million people living in Latin America, and about 300 million people living in the United States.”

Perhaps, then, it would be in order for the “Anglos” to retreat even further, before they are entirely overwhelmed. This brings to mind a most interesting remark made by Dr. Josue Gonzalez, the director-designate of the Office of Bilingual Education (the head of the program, in other words), in the course of an interview that he granted me. Actually, Dr. Gonzalez said many interesting things. He suggested a possible cause of the rift with the Office of Education. “Bilingual education was hatched in Congress, not in the bureaucracy,” he said. “The constituents (i.e., Hispanics, mostly) talked directly to Congress. Most government programs are generated by so-called administrative proposal—that is, from within the bureaucracies themselves.”

He said of regular public education in America: “I’ve plotted it on a graph: by the year 2010, most college graduates will be mutes!” (No wonder the Office of Education isn’t too wildly enthusiastic.) And he said that, contrary to what one might imagine, many “Anglo” parents are in fact only too anxious for their children to enroll in a bilingual course. (If Johnny doesn’t learn

anything else, at least he might as well learn Spanish—that at least is my interpretation.)

The melting-pot idea is dead, Dr. Gonzalez kept reassuring me. Why? I asked him. What was his proof of this? He then made what I felt was a revealing observation, and one that is not normally raised at all, although it exists at the subliminal level. “We must allow for diversity . . .,” he began, then, suddenly veering off: “The counterculture of the 1960s showed that. Even the WASP middle-American showed that the monolithic culture doesn’t exist. Within the group, even, they were rejecting their own values.” I imagine that Attila or Alaric, in an expansive and explanatory mood, might have said much the same thing to some sodden Roman senators who were trying to figure out how it was that Rome fell, exactly.

Dr. Gonzalez had me there and he knew it, so he promptly resumed the offensive. “There are those who say that to speak whatever language you speak is a human right,” he went on. “The Helsinki Agreements and the President’s Commission on Foreign Language Study commit us to the study of foreign languages. Why not our own—domestic—languages?”

Later on I decided to repeat this last comment to George Weber, the associate director of the Council for Basic Education, a somewhat lonely group in Washington. The grandson of German immigrants, Mr. Weber speaks perfect English. “Only in America,” he said. “Only in America would someone say a stupid thing like that. Can you imagine a Turk arriving in France and complaining that he was being denied his human rights because he was taught at school in French, not Turkish? What do you think the French would say to that?”

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