

Book Me a Room at the Tower of Babel

A QUIET REVOLUTION IS OCCURRING IN THIS COUNTRY, and most of us are unaware of it—because we don't speak the language. Throughout California and Texas and South Florida, Hispanic communities that don't need to define themselves in terms of their English-speaking counterparts are taking root.

These trends are not isolated. In metropolitan Chicago, the Hispanic population has increased nearly 70 percent in the past decade and is approaching 1 million people. In Hartford, Connecticut, the population is now 40 percent Hispanic, and according to its Hispanic mayor, "Hartford has become a Latin city, so to speak. It's a sign of things to come."

Both the Bush and Kerry campaigns recognize the importance of this demographic shift, and their election websites have buttons to automatically display their full contents "en español."

We are a nation of immigrants, but throughout our history immigrants have assimilated into American culture, as evidenced most directly through the adoption of the mother tongue. But this revolution promises to be different.

The influential political scientist Samuel Huntington views it this way: "The persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages. Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves and rejecting Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream." (*Foreign Policy*, March/April 2004)

Are the prospects for our country really so dire?

Our closest encounter with a bilingual society is Quebec, and the last time I checked, Montreal had not devolved into chaos. But is that a special case?

By expanding our horizons, we can see that it's not. When it comes to the blending of languages and cultures, there's a brave new world out there.

Switzerland operates with four official languages. India has 15.

The emerging European Union provides a particularly



fascinating example. With 25 member states and 20 officially recognized languages, "the EU will soon require 80 interpreters per language per day ... with (translation) costs approaching one billion pounds per year." (*The Guardian*, April 23, 2004) If you can translate from Maltese to Finnish and back again to Portuguese, there's a job waiting for you in Brussels.

But this linguistic and cultural stew isn't confined to political conferences. Within the next decade, cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam are expected to be dominated by people of foreign descent, and this could lead to places we can only begin to imagine.

Consider this evocative description provided by writer Ken Dilanian in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (May 30, 2004):

"If there is a more striking example of ethnic diversity in Europe than the Albert

Cuyp Market (in Amsterdam), it's

not by much. Stroll down the mile-long stretch of stalls on a sunny afternoon and you'll see turbaned Sikhs selling jeans to Moroccan boys, Turkish women in head scarves buying snacks from Surinamese vendors, and Ghanaians walking into Indonesian restaurants. It seems as if every racial and ethnic group on the planet is represented here, all mingling unselfconsciously with the native Dutch."

Is this the future that Huntington dreads? People of all colors, languages, and cultures transacting the business of life as if they had more in common than not?

I don't disagree that demographic trends may be taking us to a different place, but couldn't that be a better place? Rather than accept Huntington's notion that Mexican immigration is "a major potential threat to the country's cultural and political integrity," perhaps we should join with the rest of the world to see where this experiment of language leads.

I believe our system is strong enough to survive such a challenge. After all, will our Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights be any less wonderful if they appear in Spanish? Or Maltese, for that matter?

Thomas Jefferson wrote: "I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past."

That translates well into any language.

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