

What Future for Spanish in the USA ?

BERREZOUH Hanaà
Université Dr. Tahar moulay,
Saïda, ALGERIA

ملخص

بالرغم من كون اللغة الانجليزية لغة وطنية في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، إلا أنها لم تبلغ مرتبة اللغة الرسمية في هذه المنطقة، وهو ما فتح بابا واسعا أمام الأقليات التي تتعايش مع مبادئ الجمهورية الديمقراطية المتعددة الثقافات. حيث عمل المهاجرون -المنحدرون من أصول مختلفة- على المحافظة على لغاتهم الأم والمداومة على استعمالها، إلا أن محاولاتهم باءت بالفشل نتيجة للسياسة التقييدية التي فرضتها الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية لتنظيم الهجرة، وفي المقابل نلاحظ أن الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية تواجه حاليا تحديا جديدا في ميدان تنظيم الهجرة، يرجع ذلك إلى كون أغلب المهاجرين ذوي أصول إسبانية، وهم معروفون بطابعهم التمردى. وإجمالا يعزى عدم امتثال هؤلاء لمتطلبات الاندماج الثقافى في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية إلى تفرد هذه الفئة من المهاجرين وتميزهم عن غيرهم، مما ينبئ بمستقبل مختلف للغة الإسبانية عن باقي اللغات في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية.

The main purpose of the present paper is to locate the language of Cervantes in American economic, political, social and geographical spheres. In the United States, Spanish has become a concurrent language with English whose acknowledged universality as a *lingua franca* seems to resist all linguistic threats due to the role of media in promoting and maintaining such international status. At the same time, the current status of English in the USA should be featured in the hope of highlighting the fate of its Spanish counterpart. Indeed, there is a great scope for further research, and this article is merely intended as a signpost for future research.

The English language is halfway through the global system and plays a role similar to that of the dollar in the international monetary system¹. The absence of bipolarity in the planetary linguistic system and the monopolizing aspect of the language of the dollar are mainly due to demographic, ideological as well as economic factors. Jean Laponce writes in this concern,

What determines the power of a language? Historical linguistics is unanimous: that power does not reside in the language itself : it lies in its demographic, economic and political correlates.

(Laponce, 2003: 59)

However, one should meditate on the fact that whilst English is recognized as a *lingua franca* overseas, the mention of the English language is found nowhere in the American Constitution and the issue of codifying a national tongue never took place at the Philadelphia Federal convention in 1787. All facts combined give opportunity for other languages to compete with English in economic, social and political arenas. This opportunity is afforded to the Spanish language for a variety of reasons.

Currently, Spanish is spoken by approximately 400 million people in the world and is thus the fourth in terms of world languages use after Mandarin Chinese, English and Hindi. What is more, it is an official language in twenty one countries. Its center of gravity lies clearly in Latin America. On a global scale, while

Spanish does not enjoy the political potential of English, it does enjoy a substantial cultural presence. The Nobel Prize for Literature, for instance, was won by Spanish speakers on ten occasions².

Actually, the United States of America rank first, among nation-states where Spanish accounts for a foreign language, in terms of Spanish language use. Besides, Spanish benefits from a better status in the United States as it is recognized not as a foreign language but as a second language.

The first issue that may provide us with a view on the status of the Spanish language in the USA is the demographic factor. Hispanics, who, according to Americans, are a recalcitrant population in terms of assimilation, accounted on aggregate for 14.1% of the total U.S. population in 2005, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. They are today the largest ethnic minority in the USA after White Anglo Saxon Protestants. The U.S. Hispanic population is very diverse and yet bound together with one linguistic tradition, i.e. sharing one language: Spanish. Apart from their demographic growth, Hispanics are not similar to previous immigrants. Unlike European waves of immigration, Hispanics come from adjacent countries. Moreover, there is a non-stop legal and illegal influx of Hispanics in the United States and, most importantly, Hispanics are regionally concentrated in the southwestern rim of the United States. These particular defining characteristics of a new genre of immigration in a globalizing world have exacerbated the rising anxiety affecting American nativists and assimilationists.

Hispanics' repudiation to assimilate into American mainstream culture has taken on a flurry of academia and media interest, especially when the continuity and persistence of Hispanic immigration serve as a cultural refreshment for U.S. Hispanics. Indeed, this interminable influx of Hispanics into the USA serves as a bulwark against what ethnic groups regard as « ethnic cleansing ». In this regard, assimilation, in the view of first and second generation Hispanics, is complete anathema.

Assimilation in the USA has been the tradition of integrating immigrants into the host culture. The main convenience of this

process has been the integration of immigrants into the American economic sphere allowing them more social mobility. However, opponents of assimilation argue that the latter is detrimental to ethnic groups. They contend that its primary negative aspect lies in its very definition as *«the decline, and at its endpoint the disappearance of an ethnic/ racial distinction and the cultural and social differences that express it»* (Alba and Nee 1997: 863),

As for assimilation among the Hispanic subset, I part ways with Samuel Huntington in his belief that assimilation is lingering among this ethnic subset. To support this argument, I shall assess the applicability of two canonical assimilation theories on the Hispanic group and shortly afterwards shift to the discussion of the aftermaths of such a phenomenon.

First, let us consider for a while how assimilation is achieved through Park's canonical «cycle of race relations»³ and test its viability among the Hispanic population. Park states that the first step in the «race relations cycle» is *contact* that takes place between host members and immigrants. Through contact, the two groups will develop a sense of *competition* on the economic scale. In the meantime, Park furthers, immigrants will certainly be dominated by natives and *accommodation* will take place. Pragmatically, Park's theory holds verity among past immigration waves that were cut off from their origins. However, Hispanics emigrate from adjacent countries and settle in states that are overwhelmingly populated by Hispanics. Thus, the first and most important step in the «race relations cycle» i.e., *contact* seems to have no plausibility among Hispanics since, in their case, contact remains 90 percent or so Hispanic.

Milton Gordon, on the other hand, specified seven variables of assimilation where «structural assimilation» is the final stage of integration⁴. Gordon believes, in this concern, that once «structural assimilation» (the entry of members of an ethnic minority into primary group relationships with the majority group) is achieved; all other types of assimilation will naturally follow. However, the critical distinction in Gordon's conceptual scheme lay between acculturation and what he termed «structural assimilation». In Gordon's account, acculturation (the adoption of a second culture while

entailing other forms of assimilation, and the stage of acculturation could last constantly. Ergo, we may wonder at this level whether Hispanics will assimilate or acculturate.

The key element that facilitates immigrants' assimilation, according to Gordon, is their capacity to climb the social ladder and participate in the social and cultural activities of host members. Or, otherwise put, this process of upward social mobility is what characterizes Milton Gordon's «structural assimilation» whose primary condition is «large-scale entrance into cliques, clubs, and institutions of host society, on primary group level». In order to be able to enter the organizing social institutions of the host society, immigrants should first be able to achieve some economic success that, in turn, enables them to get attuned to the social conduct of host members through the relationship that emerges between the two in the market place. Yet, if immigrants are not able to climb that economic ladder, the entrance into the host societal institutions is unlikely to take place. Thus, both Gordon and Park view *contact* as a stepping stone to the achievement of integration.

Reflecting on the Hispanic condition, much of the data show that Hispanics are unable to climb both economic and social ladders due to their low rates in the educational realm. The data of the U.S. Census Bureau in 2003 showed that

Hispanics are among the least educated group in the United States: 11 percent of those over age 25 have earned a bachelor's degree or higher compared with 17 percent of blacks, 30 percent of whites, and 49 percent of Asian Americans in the same age group.

(Tienda and Mitchell 2006: 180)

Understandably, if Hispanics' education rates are below the national level, this indicates their inability to move forward in economic terms. More importantly, their incapability to enter the American labor market slows down the pace of their assimilation, mainly due to the almost inexistent *contact* between them and the Anglos. If "*contact*" between Hispanics and the Anglos is unlikely to take place, this entails that the Hispanics are not acquainted with the Anglos' social modes of conduct, and consequently cannot integrate

Anglos' social modes of conduct, and consequently cannot integrate in a society whose way of life is «alien». As a result, the project of assimilating this novel immigrant population calls for a revolution at the level of politics of integration.

Moreover, talking about Hispanics and WASP Americans in cultural terms is like comparing apples and oranges. Thus, Hispanics' unwillingness to assimilate is above reproach on account of a great incompatibility between American culture and the Hispanic one. The latter is derived from a country that had been dominated by Arabs for eight centuries. The former, on the other hand, derives from Western European Judeo Christian culture. Therefore, no matter how linguistically and politically acculturated Hispanics are, their culture cannot be completely eroded.

At this level of analysis, a salient question may arise: if Hispanics are not willing to assimilate and persist in preserving their cultural heritage, what can we predict for the Spanish language in multicultural USA?

Despite a salient factor testifying to the non-feasibility of assimilation among Hispanics, the «invasion» of the Spanish language and culture in the U.S. educational realm is also an outstanding aftermath of Hispanics' reluctance to assimilate in American mainstream. In fact, facing the burgeoning Hispanic population in the 1970's, the U.S. government had to find ways to make children and adolescents continue their schooling while inciting them to become American citizens. Americans were then confronted with a dilemma: should schools stop teaching history or mathematics to Spanish speaking learners until they fully acquire the English language, or should formal education be conducted in the immigrants' native tongue? Finally, the use of Spanish as an *ad hoc* language was hammered out as a last resort.

Introducing bilingual education aimed at heading off the high levels of Hispanic dropouts and providing them with basic knowledge in their native language, but at the same time reinforcing their speaking, listening, and reading abilities in English. Understandably, instead of integrating Hispanic immigrants directly via the job market, governmental agencies sought to integrate them through

bilingual educational programs that basically aimed at new assimilation policy more than a triumph of minority languages. However, although bilingual education was an urgent solution for the problem of Hispanic dropouts, it did not renovate assimilation politics but rather impaired the chances of assimilating the Hispanic population.

Highlighting the pivotal role of bilingual education in the procrastination of assimilation among Hispanics, Linda Chavez asserts,

Bilingual education marked the first salvo in Hispanics' war to preserve their ethnic identity. But when the program was initiated more than twenty years ago, there was little hint that it would become a major diversion from the path of assimilation.

(Chavez 1991: 10)

It, then, became known that bilingual education's primary purport was to maintain ethnic identity and promote group solidarity among Hispanics through language. Henceforth, bilingual education was not the consequence of poor academic performance of Hispanic learners. It was rather a venture to remain loyal to ethnic roots.

However, once Americans felt that their linguistic unity was threatened, some measures were taken to undermine bilingual education and favor «unilingualism» throughout the nation. Eventually, due to the rising Hispanophobia many states proceeded to give English an official status, yet states with overwhelming linguistic minorities did not welcome the procedure and argued that the English Only Movement was an outspoken attack against freedom of speech and a showcase of American xenophobia.

It is true that English language learning, in a globalizing age, facilitates both the understanding and the communication with WASP Americans. To clarify this idea one example would be sufficient. Let us imagine a Hispanic immigrant in the USA who is originally a monolingual Spanish speaker. Let us call him José. The latter is in need of a job. He will introduce himself in any of American work institutions. Conventionally, an interview between the employer and the applicant is necessary before getting a job. While José is a Spanish speaker, the American employer is naturally an English

seem impossible unless the employer were bilingual. On all fronts, the employer is not required to learn the language of the applicant; however, the latter, for economic reasons, should learn the language of the employer. Thus, linguistic assimilation seems to be instrumental.

Eventually, a recent national survey of Hispanic immigrants showed that 72 percent were Spanish dominant, 25 percent of them were bilingual, and a mere 4 percent were English dominant. By the second generation, roughly 7 percent of adult Hispanics were Spanish dominant, and about 47 percent were bilingual or English dominant. Among the third and higher generations, not only did Spanish dominance recede, but less than one-quarter were bilingual⁵.

However, Hispanics' English language use is confined to particular settings especially when English language use dominates the communicative situation. In fact, Hispanics still prefer to use Spanish at home due to the size, persistence and concentration of Hispanic immigration that tends to keep Spanish language use alive through successive generations. Huntington asserts in this concern,

In 2000 more than 28 million people in the United States spoke Spanish at home (10.5 percent of all people over age five), and almost 13.8 million of these spoke English worse than «very well,» a 66 percent increase since 1990.

(Huntington 2004: 4)

Furthermore, it is maintained that the Hispanic preference for the use of the Spanish language grew from 44% in 1997 to 53% in 2000. Besides, its significance to Hispanics rose from 63% to 69% in 2000. At home, 70% Hispanics use Spanish more frequently than English, and 64% report that they are more comfortable speaking Spanish than English. Spanish is also spoken by more than 90% of Hispanic adults at home⁶.

In fact, the growing number of Hispanics in the United States has many implications. Demography has a significant clout on marketing. Louis Nevaer best put it when he explained that the soundest business practice is to reach consumers in their own language, and that the latter is made more urgent by Hispanics'

decision to self-segregate linguistically⁷. Surprised by the realization that a booming Hispanic community refused to speak English, Corporate America decided to consider the meaning of such a refusal and the measures it ought to take to remedy the situation. Nevaer explained that the first response was to provide some Spanish-speaking customer service personnel, and promote Spanish-language advertising. Nevaer further reports a series of research studies that were conducted by the Roslow Research Group (RRG) on the effectiveness of television commercials among Hispanics whose findings were as follow:

- Language comprehension was not an issue; yet fully bilingual and acculturated Hispanics were more influenced by advertising in Spanish than in English.

- The findings of the 2000 study signaled that these differences are of a *cultural* origin, not one of either language skills or level of acculturation or assimilation.

(Nevaer 2004: 22).

Quite understandably, Hispanics' preference to speak Spanish in public has given rise to a fragmented linguistic American market. These transformations have influenced the media and advertising industry for how to reach Hispanic consumers has become a matter of public concern due to their ascending number. By 2001, «Noticiero Univision» was overcoming 'The CBS Evening News' and 'ABC World News Tonight' in the New York metropolitan area. Furthermore, agitation broke out at ABC, CBS, and NBC when Nielsen Media Research indicated that it needed a new plan to measure television news in the New York market, where it estimated it was neglecting nearly 250,000 Hispanic households. Accordingly, the crisis that has ensued, writes Nevaer, is a course of how ill-prepared corporate America is for the Hispanization of the U.S. and North American consumer market.

NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) also provides many insights into the fragmentation of not only the American consumer market but of the North American one as well. For economic reasons, NAFTA has empowered the use of Spanish in the United States, as the evolution of Spanish-language markets throughout the United States reveals. It is stated that one in every

six American consumers speaks Spanish, and one out of three does throughout North America. In fact, there are now five linguistic markets in America composed of three languages: Anglophone Canada, Francophone Canada, Hispanic USA, Mexico, and Anglophone USA. Two of these markets are linguistically Spanish, and by 2025, Nevaer predicts, will comprise half of the people who live in the whole continent.

Eager to catch the exploding Hispanic population's attention, Corporate America is helping to adapt its advertising strategies and production to Hispanics' bicultural preferences. Procter & Gamble Co spent \$90 million on advertising meant for Hispanics for 12 products such as Crest and Tide. Different companies are taking the same initiative. Cypress California based PacifiCare Health Systems Inc. hired Russell A. Bennett, a Mexico City president, to help target the Hispanic population. Effectively, Bennett's new unit started marketing health insurance in Spanish, orienting Hispanics to Spanish speaking doctors and translating documents into Spanish for Hispanic laborers.

In this sense, any ascending linguistic minority impacts on advertising strategies, in particular, and marketing strategies, in general. Time and again, Hispanics have impacted on advertising strategies that had to be reconfigured to reach a voluminous Hispanic consumer market.

All these circumstances augure well for the future of Spanish in the USA. Many U.S. states and towns have been affected by such linguistic changes and still many others will be in the offing. Indeed, in the wake of Hispanics' imposition of Spanish language use through marketing and advertising strategies, some Anglo communities feel «alien» in such cities as Miami where Spanish speakers of Cuban descent have managed to dominate the city's life and transform its ethnic composure, its language, and its politics. By 2000, 96 percent of Miami's foreign born population came from Latin America and the Caribbean. By 2000, Huntington reports, *«Spanish was not just the language spoken in most homes; it was also the principal language of commerce, business, and politics»*

(Huntington 2005: 253).

Therefore, Hispanics in Miami have little or no motivation to assimilate into American mainstream culture. In fact, in Miami it is Cubans and Cuban Americans who are engineers, teachers, doctors, architects and run City Hall; and people who spoke no English could still live in Miami without facing linguistic impediments, provided they spoke Spanish. It is argued that it is not popular in Miami to be bilingual. Following this line of understanding, the Anglos had in fact three choices. First, they could put up with their inferior and «outsider» status. Second, they could try to assimilate into the Hispanic community, what Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick labeled *acculturation in reverse*⁸, or they could quit Miami. Eventually, about 140,000 Anglos left Miami between 1983 and 1993. The most popularized statement reflecting their exodus was the bumper sticker that read «*when the last American leaves Miami, please take the flag*».

Numbers in demographic studies mean power, especially in a political democracy, a multicultural society, and a consumer society. Thus, in the long run, the persistence of large scale Mexican immigration in Los Angeles and the Southwest will slow down the excitement for cultural assimilation. Henceforth, I agree with Huntington when he states that

sustained numerical expansion promotes cultural consolidation, and leads them not to minimize but to glory in the differences between their culture and American culture.

(Huntington 2005: 257)

All in all, the Hispanic community is growing at full tilt. If current numbers continue to rise, it is projected that Hispanics will number 60 million in the year 2020, and more than 100 million in 2050. Indeed, if things keep progressing at that rate drastic changes will ensue.

At the present time, what is in question is the future of Spanish in the USA. There are serious concerns about the survival of Spanish in the USA. The story of immigrant languages in the USA has been to flower then fade. In this concern, Max Castro points to the German example and explains that

German was once a flourishing language in the United States. German immigration then slowed to a trickle and World War I fostered anti-German feelings and English-only measures. Today, more than 45 million Americans declare their main ancestry as German, but only 1.5 million claim to speak the language.

(Castro)

Will that be the fate of Spanish?

There are many reasons to believe that Spanish will have a different fate than German and other immigrant languages. First Spanish is not an immigrant language; its presence in North America precedes the founding of the United States. What is more, Spanish is the native language of Puerto Rico whose inhabitants are native U.S. citizens. A key factor testifying to Spanish's long term survival is the continuing and persistent flow of Spanish-speaking immigrants in the United States who serve to replenish the depleting pool of Spanish speakers.

Besides the very weighty Huntingtonian arguments regarding Hispanics' unwillingness to assimilate, there is another significant nationalistic debate linked to the Hispanic population that augurs a long-lasting use of Spanish in the United States. The type of nationalism that is usually associated with the Hispanic subset in the USA is the cultural one. Nationalism as defined by sociologists means «*a feeling, a consciousness, an ideology, forming a movement to harness these sentiments and to attain greater self-determination or even independence*» (Clare Mar-Molinero 2000: 5). While nationalism discourse oftentimes engages independence statist movements, cultural nationalism, as a category, is usually associated with ethnic groups. The latter is identified through external markers that include language, race, common history, heritage and territory. Thus, it is the concern of this paper to highlight how Hispanics in the USA develop a sentiment of nationalism that is basically rooted in their shared linguistic tradition. The latter gives impetus to the linguistic nationalism of Hispanics that I believe sets in motion a linguistic balkanization of the USA.

To better understand the link between Hispanics, nationalism and the linguistic balkanization of the USA, we had better consider the degree of national attachment among Hispanics who are what Elkins and Sides call «distinctive citizens»⁹. Zachary and Sides argue that *distinctive citizens* i.e. those who are not native-born citizens, naturally manifest less attachment to the locus of residence than native-born citizens because of two reasons:

Residents of one country who were born in another may not, by virtue of being immigrants, have been exposed to the typical socialization process that fosters national attachment in native-born citizens vary in degree from one case to the other. They may also maintain or retain attachment to their country of birth.

(Zachary & Sides 2006: 4)

Because national attachment among distinctive citizens like Hispanics is generally bound to the homeland, precisely in terms of cultural nationalism, Spanish language use is believed to survive in the USA because Hispanics themselves do not tend to substitute Spanish with English but rather opt for bilingualism. The choice of bilingualism is mainly motivated by Hispanics' capability or rather willingness to maintain bonds with their homelands. In fact, Spanish is likely to survive in the USA as long as the nineteen Latin American Spanish-speaking countries¹⁰ continue to provide the United States with the Hispanic immigrant population. What is more, the attachment of the Hispanic population to its linguistic tradition is more likely to produce linguistic bifurcation that might in turn balkanize the seemingly homogeneous American linguistic community/ies.

In fact, I am of the persuasion that unlike other immigrant languages, Spanish has a substantial chance to survive in the United States. In this concern, I share opinion with Joseph Lo Bianco¹¹ who explains that «it is for these reasons-proximity, globalization, and new economic structures-that I think Spanish will be very different in the U.S. from German and other languages of immigration».

A final and equally important point is that Hispanics have become keen about retaining Spanish language use especially when the status of Spanish has been bettered through NAFTA and media advertisements. Unlike previous immigrants, Hispanics will no more feel obliged to learn English so as to be regarded as American citizens.

In sum, it all depends on Hispanic immigrants and the way they regard Hispanic heritage. To be sure, immigrants do not choose to substitute their mother tongues with other languages unless they are obliged to. However, since Hispanics have all the chances to keep Spanish alive, it is no surprise that Spanish will have a different fate from other immigrant languages.

NOTES :

1. Translation mine, see Bernard Cassen, *Un Monde Polyglotte pour Echapper à la Dictature de l'Anglais*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Janvier 2005, p. 22.
2. José Echegaray y Eizaguirre (Spain, 1904), Jacinto Benavente (Spain, 1922), Gabriela Mistral (Chile, 1945), Juan Ramón Jiménez (Spain, 1956), Miguel Angel Asturias (Guatemala, 1967), Pablo Neruda (Chile, 1971), Vicente Aleixandre (Spain, 1977), Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia, 1982), Camilo José Cela (Spain, 1989) and Octavio Paz (Mexico, 1990).
3. For a definition of assimilation see Robert E. Park & W.E. Burgess work, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1921, Reprint 1969, p. 735. Although Park's theory of the *race relations cycle* dates back to the 1920's, it has been valued by assimilation scholars for its timeless quality regarding the assimilation process on an economic level.
4. For more details on *structural assimilation* see Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: the Role of Race, Religion and National Origin*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1964, p.71.
5. See Pew Hispanic Center, *Assimilation and Language*, 2004: table 2.
6. See Francisco J. Valle & Judy M. Mandel, *How to Win the Hispanic Gold Rush: Critical Cultural, Demographic, Marketing, and Motivational Factors*, iUniverse, Inc, 2003, p.28.
7. See Louis E. V. Nevaer, *The Rise of the Hispanic Market in the United States: challenges, Dilemmas, and Opportunities for Corporate Management* (M.E. Sharpe, January 2004), p. 18.
8. A phrase first used by Portes and Stepick in their work *City on the Edge: the Transformation of Miami*, 1994 to describe the assimilation of host members in the cultures of immigrants.

9. The term «distinctive citizens » has been used by Elkins and Sides to refer to citizens whose characteristics distance them in some way from the state. Citizens whose primary language is not the official or predominant language, whose place of birth is outside the country, or whose religion or race differs from the norm of citizens that are, in our sense «distinct» in Zachary Elkins & John Sides, *In Search of the United Nation-State: National Attachment among Distinctive Citizens*, Center for the Study of Democracy, University of California, Irvine, Paper 06-08, 2006, p. 3.
10. Spanish is the official language of Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, and Venezuela.
11. Joseph Lo Bianco is an Australia-based expert who has studied the issue of languages internationally.

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<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/jwcrawford/Castro1.htm>
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