

BEING BILINGUAL IN AMERICA IN 2017 AND BEYOND

By Frank Gómez © 2017

The growing diversity of the population of the United States has implications for languages. Asians are the largest source of immigration today, and Asian Americans the fastest growing cohort of our population. Like many, they seek to preserve cultural and linguistic attributes.

I can relate to that pride in language and culture. I am a Spanish speaker. I dream in Spanish. I think in Spanish. I crave information about the Spanish language and the many cultures of Spanish-speaking nations.

Spanish is our second language, with some 40 million speakers (not all of the 59 million Hispanics speak Spanish). So, we rank with Mexico, Colombia and Spain as the largest Spanish-speaking lands in the world – and forecasts project that the United States will replace Mexico as the largest Spanish-speaking country in a couple of generations.

My mother was French-Canadian, and French in her family, albeit rural and not sophisticated, was a reality. My father, of Mexican origin, and born in Clifton, Arizona, spoke Spanish fluently. I sat next to him and his friends as they played cards in Spanish. I asked what they were saying. And separately, I asked my dad how to say this or that.

Living in Guatemala as a student and later in Spanish- and French-speaking countries as a Foreign Service Officer allowed me to become truly tri-lingual, for which I am grateful. I also studied Portuguese in college and got a good rating when I joined the Foreign Service, but I have not used it as much as I have used Spanish and French.

Does it matter? Well, the language skills of Latino reporters covering the Mexico earthquake and hurricanes in Houston, Florida and Puerto Rico gave them exceptional abilities to interview, to understand and to capture experiences and nuances of those tragedies. While most might not have noticed, as a trilingual, I noticed. And other multilinguals noticed.

Ok. That's one example. Here are more.

When some hear Koskiusko Bridge as Kaw-shee-YU-sko, I think Ko-shee-U-sko. A minor point, perhaps. But it illustrates how language affects perceptions and even pronunciation.

Research, furthermore, finds that bilingual children are more adept at social engagement than others. Despite relative cultural isolation, i.e., growing up in almost exclusively Spanish-speaking environments, Spanish-dominant children relate better to others.

Is this a plus? Who knows? Former New Mexico Governor and former United Nations Ambassador Bill Richardson, a Mexican American, credits his ability to deal with North Koreans on hostage releases and United Nations issues to his bi-cultural, bi-lingual sensibilities. Just one more example.

A 2015 Pew Research Center study found that 71 percent of Hispanics said it was not necessary to speak Spanish to be considered Hispanic. For foreign born Hispanics, the percentage dropped to 58 percent, while for the U.S. born it rose to 87 percent.

Much more useful, however, would be a measure of how useful knowing Spanish is in careers and the degree to which native Spanish speakers suppress their knowledge or use of Spanish. Other studies deal with many aspects of immigrants, especially the undocumented, but rarely explore language issues.

Given that Asia is now the largest source of immigration to the United States, surely more attention should be given to language use. Asians and Pacific Islander Americans are the fastest growing cohort of our population. And we should get with **their** program! This means that we have a long way to go to understand, value and adapt to linguistic and cultural realities.

Health Care: One example.

The Research Institute of United States Spanish (RIUSS) was founded in 2015 to study Spanish as written and spoken here. Its sights are trained on healthcare, drawing on research that shows that many care providers lack knowledge and sensitivity to assure that care receivers understand what they read or are told.

Today, in 2017, children of patients are called upon to interpret for doctors, nurses and other care givers, often with little concern about whether communication is correct and understood. This is literally a matter of life and death (I am less aware of the situation for Asian language speakers, but it must be quite similar).

Where are we going?

Notwithstanding nativist sentiments, the multilingual, multicultural train is not going to be stopped. Whereas minorities have had to adapt to majorities for centuries, now the majorities will have to adapt to the new majority – uncomfortable as it may be.

What many fail to realize is that the United States – and other nations, including Canada – are rapidly becoming more diverse. This inexorable change should be viewed through the lens of what is best for America.

We should embrace the reality of a shrinking world wherein peoples move, become rooted and shape societies. Some less advanced societies in Africa and Asia do not face this conundrum. We, however, along with other nations, can make the most of it.