

WE NEED A LINGUA FRANCA
By Barbara Mujica

Spanish is the language in which I conduct most of my personal, social and professional business. Furthermore, my entire career has been devoted to the promotion of Hispanic culture through teaching, writing, and directing a Spanish-language theater group. There is nothing in the Constitution to prevent me from operating in a language other than English, and, if English becomes the official language of the United States, this situation will not change.

Opponents have misrepresented the goals of the movement to establish English as the official language of the United States by dubbing it the "English-only initiative." In reality, the officialization of English would not prohibit the use of other languages. All unofficial communication - such as family, religious, private or professional business - could be conducted in any language the participants preferred. Bilingual education would not be abolished, although the stress would be on mainstreaming students rather than maintaining their native languages. Emergency, health and safety services could continue to operate in languages other than English. Foreign-language publications and television and radio programs would not become illegal.

Foreign language teaching would not be diminished. In fact, U.S. English and other organizations that promote the confirmation of English as this country's official language encourage foreign language study. They recognize that knowledge of languages widens the cultural horizons of the individual and that the U.S.A. needs people who are fluent in other tongues to conduct diplomacy and business in the international arena.

Certainly there are valid reasons for supporting the drive to make English the official language of the United States. In a country comprised of myriad ethnic and linguistic groups, it is desirable to establish an official lingua franca, a vehicle that enables all of us to communicate with one another. Although it is possible to survive in almost any large American city without knowing English, in order to participate fully in the social, economic and political life of this country, English is essential.

Many argue that a person's patriotism is not dependent upon a knowledge of English. Yet, in order to carry out responsibly the duties of citizenship, a person must have access to major sources of information. Congress debates in English. The president addresses the nation in English. The large newspapers and news magazines use English. Without English, a person is dependent upon secondary sources - politicians and media that may or may not interpret the facts accurately. It is fair and logical that people who wish to exercise the rights of citizenship be required to do so in English.

Until recently, most immigrants have viewed mastery of English as a priority, but today, unprecedented numbers operate exclusively in another language. In areas of the Southwest, Florida, New York and Chicago, the English base is eroding, creating a subclass of people who do not possess a basic skill that they need in order to move up the economic ladder. In states such as California and Florida, it is possible to go through school and graduate without learning English. Yet, without English, youngsters will find it nearly impossible to go on to college or to obtain any but menial jobs. They will find themselves confined to a linguistic ghetto that offers limited opportunities.

The movement to officialize the English language in no way implies the dominance of a majority culture over minority cultures. Indeed, there is no ethnic majority in the United States. According to the 1980 census, less than 14 percent of all Americans are of British origin, which means that the Anglo-Saxons are as much in the minority as everyone else. The English initiative is simply a means of establishing one language, the *de facto* language of the United States, as the vehicle for making official communication.

Making English the official language of the United States would send a clear message that in order to reap the benefits of U.S. residency, it is essential to know English. It would dispel the illusion that it is possible to enjoy fully the advantages this country has to offer without learning the language.

But the point of officializing English is to strength our common bond, not to obliterate our individual identities. For millions of Americans, ethnicity and language are linked. Communicating in an ancestral tongue is a means of maintaining ties with the past. It is an affirmation of personal and collective identity. The Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, and one of the ways many of us express who we are is by speaking a foreign language.

Ethnic diversity is one of the greatest strengths of the United States. English should be our official language, but it should not be our only language.

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