Letter from the editor

Blest Be the Tie that Binds

Some years ago, while traveling in Thailand, we were advised to skip the personal pronouns if we wanted to try communicating in their language with the Thai people — officials in particular, and especially the police. Apparently there are a great many forms of the personal pronoun, some of which have strong connotations as to social status. It is easy to insult someone by choosing the wrong word. These relationships in turn derive from the culture, and are certainly different depending on whether it has been a class-based structure with royalty, or a strongly egalitarian one, as for instance in Australia. I doubt that the Aussie's 'mate' would go down very well in many places around the world.

Human strife is often incited by differences in religion, language and/or race (or other visible physical differences), to mention just three factors. In some places such as Ireland, race and language are the same, and religious differences are a sufficient cause. In others, such as Sri Lanka, not only is the language different (Sinhalese for the majority and Tamil for the minority), but so is religion (the Sinhalese are mainly Muslim and the Tamils are Hindu). I am told by a colleague, who is from the most southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, that the people are not physically distinguishable.

In other places, such as Rwanda, the curse of diversity comes in all three forms: there are readily identifiable physical differences (the Tutsis are taller and have distinct facial features), in addition to variations in language and religion. Triple discord, one might call it.

Cooperating with then U.S. Senator S.I. Hayakawa, I helped to found, back in 1983, the first organization designed to protect and defend the English language in our country. We called it U.S.English. Our goal was to help avoid language-based strife in the United States of the type often seen elsewhere around the world. Given the differences that exist in the U.S. on race and religion — the latter fortunately fairly well contained by our First Amendment and the secular/commercial nature of our society — we certainly do not need the additional centripetal force of language difference.

The effort to maintain the "tie that binds" of a common language gathered force during the 1980s and 1990s with a number of states adopting Official English by legislative action — sometimes by citizen initiative. The law passed by voters in Arizona was immediately taken to court, and now, eight years later, has finally been accepted for review by that court of last resort in the U.S., the Supreme Court. The story is told in our lead article by Robert Park, leader of the initiative drive in Arizona, the sole remaining defendant in the resultant legal case, and a former board member of U.S.English. He now chairs English Language Advocates, a recently formed group that took over funding of this so-called "Yniguez" case after U.S.English dropped out.

Other articles treat the issue of statehood for Puerto Rico and how this proposal has highlighted the Official English issue, and such related topics as language exams for citizenship and bilingual education. We hope you will find this feature section a good primer on the language topic.

A word about the "curse of diversity" mentioned above. Part of the cant of our country is that "our strength is in our diversity." Diversity is similar to many other human traits: it has its weak points as well as its strengths. The Japanese for instance see strength in their uniformity, and in fact they do not have to spend time, energy and money fighting each other over many of the things that occupy us: race, religion and language, to mention just the three topics of this editorial.

In the U.S., we would do well to recognize the down side of diversity and try to deal with these problems — and the question of whether immigration policy should be allowed to increase the present level of diversity even further.

We hope you will find in this issue some profitable late summer reading.

    JOHN TANTON
    Editor and Publisher