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FRANKLY SPEAKING

A DISCUSSION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

BY FRANK BRAMLETT, PH.D.



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What Part English, What Part Spanish?

Back in July, I was sitting in my office at school, working on a syllabus for a new sophomore-level class on language and society. I was exploring the U.S. Census Bureau website to get a sense of the most current information we have about language communities in the United States. I had the radio on, too, and while I was browsing census data about Nebraska, I heard an advertisement on one of the FM stations. The ad was primarily an English-language ad, but it also had a few Spanish words. It turned out to be a job advertisement for a radio station in the city that wanted to hire a Spanish/English bilingual speaker to be a sales director. I don't know if this is the first time an advertisement of this sort has aired in Omaha, but I suspect it is quite rare.

Regardless of the scarcity of this kind of advertisement, it occurred to me that not a day goes by that I don't hear or read some Spanish in Omaha: "Se habla español." There's an FM radio station that broadcasts in Spanish, and sometimes I can catch an Atlanta Braves game on television that airs

in Spanish. And I've enjoyed the sounds of Spanish as much as I've enjoyed the tapas I've eaten at España. It seems that there is a growing presence of Spanish in Omaha, a fact borne out by the U.S. Census website.

The 2000 census is almost dizzying in the amount of information it contains. For example, it indicates the growing concentration of urban/suburban populations, the concomitant decrease in rural/farming populations, and the ever-increasing number of people who must be fed, clothed, housed, and generally taken care of. The Census also illustrates relative geographic distributions of minority populations; the Census Bureau website has both written reports and summaries, but it also has maps dedicated to each group it tracks. These maps show, for example, that the majority of African Americans live in the southeastern U.S. and northward along the Atlantic coast. The majority of Latino Americans live in the southwestern U.S. and northward along the Pacific coast. The majority of Native Americans live on reservations in Arizona, New Mexico, and other states like Alaska, North Carolina, and South Dakota.

For some of these communities — Latino Americans and Native Americans especially — the linguistic reality is not "English only" but English and another language. For instance, in Tallequah, Oklahoma, many Cherokees speak both English and Cherokee. In San Antonio, Texas, a majority

of Latinos speak both English and Spanish. Omaha itself, in addition to a significant Latino community, is witnessing growing numbers of immigrants from Vietnam, Thailand, and Sudan. While it is true that many of our non-native English speakers are immigrants, many of them are born and raised in Nebraska and Iowa in existing bilingual communities.

The study of world languages tells us that roughly half of all human beings know more than one language. What this means is that any person in the world is just as likely to be bilingual or multilingual as to be monolingual. (A good book about these ideas is *Language in Society* by Susanne Romaine.) In general, there are two ways for a community to be bilingual. First, there are two groups of people who live in very close proximity to each other but speak different languages; this is bilingualism on a societal level and is evident in many parts of Canada (English-speaking Canada and French-speaking Canada).

In the second type of bilingualism, individuals speak two or more languages because

they grow up in households that use two or more languages. Imagine a child whose father and paternal grandmother are monolingual but whose mother's family speaks a different language. The child must be bilingual in order to communicate with her family. Also, it is not uncommon for families to speak one language as their home language but also speak the language of the society at large for school and/or government. Conversely, that family might go to religious ceremonies and worship in a different language (this would be a third or fourth language, depending on circumstances).

In Nebraska, more than 90 percent of the population 5 years old and older speak *only* English, meaning that less than 10 percent of the population are bilingual in English and another language or do not speak English. In fact, less than 1 percent of Nebraska's residents in 2000 reported not being able to speak English at all. In contrast to Nebraska, the United States as a whole has roughly 18 percent of its residents who are either bilingual in English and another language or do not speak English.

I don't want to suggest that every speaker has full command of every language they engage in. The family might have a very narrow ability to use the language of worship, just enough to successfully participate in services. Or parents might have just enough of the government language to read documents, apply for services, pay taxes, etc. But

when a child grows up in a home where two languages are used, ordinarily that child acquires full conversational command of both of those languages. Again, the United States can be an exception in many cases because of the social prohibitions against using any language other than English (Nebraska passed its English-only law shortly after World War I).

When I heard the sales rep job ad on the radio, I have to admit that I was surprised to hear it. I wasn't really expecting the strength and importance of the Latino community in Omaha to be recognized in such a public way. But the advertisement does recognize the complexity of our community, and it both acknowledges the place that Spanish has today and hints at the prominence of Spanish tomorrow. As a linguist, I am interested in seeing how the milieu of languages in Omaha will change to reflect these shifts in demographics. As a resident of Omaha, I hope that we will be able to live diversity rather than just talk about it.