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2012

# Lost in Translation

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### Recommended Citation

Peterson, Christine '16, "Lost in Translation" (2012). *Outstanding Gateway Papers*. Paper 3.  
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## Lost in Translation

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The ramifications of Proposition 227, legislation that threatened to eliminate bilingual education passed by California in 1998, sparked a nationwide debate about the validity of education that non-English speaking students were receiving in a bilingual classroom versus that of an English-only classroom. While there was a deluge of arguments regarding the efficiency of English comprehension in the two classroom environments, what many commentators on the issue overlooked was the difference in the retention of the students' identities. Not only are the students' identities being compromised when the school systems do not tolerate their home language (Cummins, 2005), but this also strengthens language subordination in the school system. Lippi-Green (1997) defines the language subordination process as having such effects as granting one group authority over everyone else, trivializing target languages, and making explicit promises and threats. The abolishment of bilingual classes and programs follows the language subordination process in each of these aspects while at the same time jeopardizing the personal identities of thousands of students in the United States. The combination of the loss of identity and the empowerment of the language subordination process make a strong argument for bilingual education programs.

Despite the fact that school systems are constantly trying to teach a second language to students in middle school and high school in order to meet certain education criteria, elementary schools that do not support the bilingual education

system are preaching the importance of just one language and in the process diminishing the aptitude of those students who speak both (Cummins, 2005). The irony of a system in which students are asked not to speak a certain language and then asked again five years later in high school to relearn a language they were once fluent in is condemns anti-bilingual legislation such as Proposition 228. Bilingual programs foster a learning environment in which the students can grow in both Standard American English and Spanish, and utilize their unique situation in its entirety. Despite the undisputed fact that the younger a student is, the more capable they are of obtaining a new language, most school systems promote a monolingual classroom while students are younger and try largely unsuccessfully to convert both native English speakers and former Spanish speakers into bilingual students when they're older (Cummins, 2005). This causes bilingual speakers to be confused regarding the importance of their home language.

In addition to the issue regarding trying to reteach a language to a generation of formerly native speakers, banning bilingual classes has a lasting effect on the students' identities and how they view their heritage language. "Children understand very quickly that the school is an English-only zone and they often internalize ambivalence and even shame in relation to their linguistic and cultural heritage" (Cummins, 2005, p. 586). Discouraging students from speaking in their home language at school promotes conformity and suppresses their Latino identities. These identities are closely tied to a system of values that is conducive to their success. "These values, such as respect of family and authority, deference for education, and optimism about the future, provide Latino youth a sense of identity

and social connectedness, both of which are crucial to their psychological wellbeing” (Suaréz-Orozco, 2001, p. 150). The psychological wellbeing of students isn’t being taken into account while schools are scrambling to meet education criteria and students are feeling discriminated against. Rodriguez (1983) describes his English-only experience as “falling through the chasm between two languages. The Spanish had been beaten out of me in the early years of school - and I didn't learn English very well either. This was the predicament of many Chicanos. We could almost be called incommunicable... We needed to obtain victories in language built on an infrastructure of self-worth. But we were defeated from the start” (p. 150).

The dismissal of bilingual programs plays a huge role in supporting language subordination in the United States. Language subordination is the process through which one language group seizes authority over the rest and dominates a society by constantly denigrating all other languages and dialects. Some aspects of language subordination are strengthened by anti-bilingual legislation, such as instituting language authorities that support English-only environments as replacements for bilingual teachers who emphasize the importance of both languages. “Within the mainstream classroom, students' knowledge of additional languages has typically been viewed as either irrelevant or as an impediment to the learning of English and overall academic achievement” (Cummins, 2005, p. 586). This not only causes students to doubt the validity of their home language, but also trivializes the language. In one case in a study done by Rubio and Attinasi (2000), a teacher was scolded by an uninvited parent for using Spanish in what Proposition 227 had deemed an English-only classroom. The fact that a parent criticized a teacher in

front of her class demonstrates to the students that the Spanish language should never be used in an academic setting and debased the language as a whole. Attinasi (1998) suggests that Article I of Proposition 227 equates school underachievement with bilingualism. By associating a group with underachievement, it can become a part of their identity and cause students to resent their identity and the language behind it.

Another attribute of the language subordination process is the generating of explicit promises and threats as a means of maintaining power as the dominant language. Advocates of English only classrooms bolster their arguments with promises of a child's successful future should they acquire a satisfactory grasp of the English language. One example is the promise made to students that if they learn Standard American English the rest of their schooling would be easier as it is written and taught entirely in SAE. They juxtapose these promises of academic and occupational prosperity with threats of certain failure should students choose not to adhere to speaking strictly English. Jobs that require speaking to customers rarely hire anyone with an accent due to customer complaint about not being able to understand them. Accompanying these hypothetical promises and threats, Proposition 227 provides actual promises and threats. Article 4 of this legislation declares that fifty million dollars will be distributed to community English and literacy programs in areas that abide by their rules. This philanthropic gesture is then followed by Article 5, which states that parents may, and are encouraged to, sue educators who do not follow these new regulations (Attinasi, 1998). In one case, a mother had her child taken away by a judge who claimed her inability to speak

English was child neglect. This empowerment of SAE through the language subordination process is negatively affecting the way non-English speaking students view themselves and their home language as well as debilitating the overall quality of their education by refusing to compromise with the language of instruction.

“Mastering academic English is a notoriously difficult task requiring many years of instruction, well beyond the years required to acquire oral proficiency” (Carreira, 2007, p. 148). Usually only a fraction of the time needed to learn SAE is allotted for Spanish-speaking students such as is true in Proposition 227 which gives students a year of English immersion (Rubio and Attinasi, 2000). While non-English speaking students are struggling to learn the language, their non-language classes are still being taught in a language they don’t comprehend and they are understandably falling behind in these subjects.

The pertinence of bilingual education programs within both schools and communities has been backed by reason and research. In regard to its legitimacy as a teaching method Cummins (2005) says that “among the vast majority of researchers, both in the United States and internationally, there is consensus, based on massive amounts of research evidence, that bilingual education, although not by itself a panacea for underachievement, is a legitimate and useful instructional approach for developing bilingual and bi-literate proficiency among both linguistic majority and minority students” (p. 586-587). These facts are supported by the need to preserve students’ ethnic identities and ties with their home language and culture. Bilingual education allows Spanish-speaking students to maintain an identity free of shame towards their culture while still teaching them the English

that will ameliorate their futures in the United States. For all the remarks pertaining to the benefits of bilingual education, there are an equal number of remarks that can be made concerning the inefficiency of mandating English-only classrooms, especially in heavily Hispanic-populated regions of the United States. Mandates such as Proposition 227 solidify the language subordination process in the school system. Continued support of bilingual programs and the refuting of legislation that seeks to end bilingual programs have proved its caliber on a variety of levels. Rather than shun and fear the inevitable wave of diversity converging on the United States, it is better that people learn to embrace the diversity and learn from it.

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Assignment:

4-5 pages in length on a topic chosen by you but relevant to the material covered in the course. Choose one of the following:

- *A current event analysis* choosing an article from a news source that discusses an issue dealing with the role of language and identity in terms of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and/or race. You will then discuss if there is any bias in the author's understanding of language and identity.
- *An expository essay*: investigate an idea, evaluate evidence, expound on the idea, and set forth an argument concerning that idea in a clear and concise manner. Cite at least 4 reviews or academic articles dealing with a film, short story or music that focus on issues of language and identity.

Formatting: 12-point font, Times New Roman, one-inch margins, double-spaced, APA format. Put your name at the top left margin. Have a title suitable to the subject, typed and centered above the first paragraph. Be sure to have page numbers after the first page. Make sure that these assignments are free of significant grammatical and typing mistakes.