
Posted on Sun, Jun. 11, 2006

Say adios to a vibrant language

By R. Thomas Berner

I'm trying to figure out what's behind the thinking in the U.S. Senate to declare English "the national language of the United States." It already is. Consider:

I grew up in Tamaqua (Indian) in Schuylkill County (Dutch). When I was in the Navy, I stood in the chow line (Chinese). Later on I moved to Centre County (British spelling), where the seat of government is located in Bellefonte (French).

Unfortunately, I've never been to Bryn Mawr (Welsh), although I have been to Wales. I now live in Santa Fe, N.M., not far from the rodeo grounds. Every year Santa Fe celebrates another birthday with a fiesta. But I could switch from Spanish to French and say it was a fete -- and most English speakers would think I was still speaking English -- if they thought about it at all.

What exactly is English?

According to one good source, it's a "West Germanic language of the Indo-European language family."

Maybe back then. But given all of the words English speakers have taken from other languages, I think it's become a language of acquisition, adaptation and innovation.

The original English speakers did not know any Chinese or Indians of the North American variety and yet words we think of as English are derived from the Chinese or the Indians and many other cultures and ethnic groups unknown to the original English speakers.

And think of the original words in English. Forget the lingo (Portuguese) of teenagers. I am thinking of the late John O'Hara, of Pottsville, a novelist of some stature who, according to my recollection, invented a neologism (French derived from Greek) to describe the sound of someone putting out a cigarette.

In English, we turn verbs into nouns and nouns into verbs. Back in the 1970s, one of my primary-school daughters climbed into the back seat of our car and demanded to be "seat-belted." Today, airline passengers are told by a security agent that they are about to be "wanded."

Some new words sound like fingernails on a chalkboard and last about that long, but the beauty of English is that it's flexible enough to give all comers an opportunity regardless of race, religion or ethnic background.

In that regard, making English the official language raises the question of what our legislators believe English is. If the proposal to make English the national language becomes law, does that mean the language, at least as we speak it in America, is frozen in time as of the day the president signs the legislation into law? Will we no longer be allowed to borrow words from other languages or make up new words? Will future novelists be stymied by federal law?

"The word's not English," an editor might say to a future O'Hara. "Take it out."

I can't image John O'Hara or any other writer bowing to such nonsense.

My hope is that wiser heads will prevail, that people with non-English names such as U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum, an alumnus (Latin) of Penn State, will realize that English is alive and well and growing, and that passing a law making it the national language belies the language's diverse history and our country's greatness that arose out of that diversity.

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