EDITORIAL

Immersion and the Revitalization of Tongues

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Would the world be better off it everybody spoke a single language, as the Bible suggests was originally the case before God in his wrath scattered us and made us speak many tongues? My own sense is that there would be a tremendous loss if we all spoke the same tongue.

We would lose not only languages but whole cultures, since language is often the embodiment of a culture. Thus story and myth, wisdom, arts and crafts, entire disciplines and sciences are lost when a language is lost. It proved hard for the Celts to be Celtish in Latin under the Roman Empire. In China, a myriad of languages have tended towards the Beijing dialect or Mandarin over the last three thousand years, weakening or wiping out old cultures and traditions. Now only five percent in a population of 1.5 billion speak minority languages and preserve minority cultures. Wherever French or English or Spanish have penetrated they have tended to weaken local tongues and culture and spread the culture of the new, especially since industrialization.

The rate at which languages around the world are declining or dying out is very great. And only a handful of languages are now spoken by many people. Once one has listed all the native speakers of Chinese, Hindi, English, Spanish, French, Russian, Arabic, and German one has covered a large part of the six billion people on the planet.

Our own aboriginal languages in Canada are under threat and have been for decades. Some, like those who speak Cree cover a wide swath of the forested lands of the country, appear to have speakers from coast to coast and to be under little threat that their language will die out. Others, like the Mohawk have made significant progress in recovering and developing their language and encouraging its use among the young. And some, like the Blackfeet of southern Alberta and Montana, have been working very hard to maintain and develop speakers of the tongue before the present generation of elders has passed. But as many drift

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into the cities the only languages of common communication are English or French.

One of the ways in which languages can be maintained and strengthened is if there are a significant number of people who learn the language, not necessarily those native to it. For example, French, English, and Spanish have many speakers from around the world who learn these tongues for purposes of commerce or literature, culture or travel. While such speakers will not necessarily guarantee the liveliness or freshness or flexibility of such tongues they do help in their maintenance. Such languages are unlikely to die out as long as there are new speakers from whatever sources.

A contribution to such maintenance in our own day has been the development of "immersion" programs in other languages. In Canada this has meant mainly French and English. But there are also programs in Ukrainian, in Chinese, and in Hebrew, for example, run as immersion programs in public school boards. A minimal immersion program is one in which those learning the language learn it from a teacher who communicates to them only in the language to be learned and not in their own tongue. This was the manner in which Shakespeare would have learned Latin at his grammar school, where English was forbidden to be spoken, even on the playground. Such programs are very effective in producing speakers with good accents and an easy fluency in everyday life in the tongue. At least in Shakespeare's case, they did not apparently affect his fluency in his native tongue and perhaps strengthened it.

The conventional method, however, of learning a second language or foreign tongue since the advent of mass schooling in Europe, in America, (and in the last hundred years over most of the globe) has been to study grammar and vocabulary of the tongue to be learned and to translate from one's own language to the new language and from the new language into one's own as a formal, daily exercise. This method characteristically does not result in many speaking the language, though it does result in the development of a more or less competent reading ability in the tongue.

An interesting study comparing the two methods was done at the behest of the Swedish school system in 1968 by Professor Torsten Husén, at the Institute for International Education in Stockholm, of Swedish high school students' grasp of a foreign language when they traveled abroad. At that time it was contemplated that there would be a major reform in language teaching in Swedish schools toward the immersion style of teaching, with students becoming conversant orally in the second

or third languages from the beginning of their studies. Thus a cohort of those under the new system was compared with a cohort of those under the old. What was discovered was that those educated by the immersion methods were able immediately to cope in a foreign country that used the language they had learned by immersion methods. The others, by contrast, who had learned languages by the old methods of translation, vocabulary, and grammar, were more or less unable to communicate upon arrival in the foreign country at all. On the other hand, the immersion students did not improve significantly after a month in the country, whereas the traditional students were gaining a spoken, written, and cultural grasp exponentially.

The puzzle for educators in abandoning one educational system or style for another is how to retain the benefits of the system abandoned while gaining those of the system embraced. This is not always easy. The papers in this issue of JET, however, suggest that many thoughtful educators are trying to accomplish this elusive goal in spite of its difficulty.

One would like to see it possible for Canadian schools to offer immersion programs in a myriad of languages, including our aboriginal tongues, not only so that persons whose tongues they originally were could speak them better, but so that there could be greater appreciation of their richness and diversity among the population at large. To some degree this has been implemented in Toronto, where about two thirds of those immigrating to Canada initially come, where children whose native tongue is neither English nor French can begin their schooling by getting immersion instruction in their native tongue as a bridging mechanism. In Sweden this is also a generally available option, especially in the large urban centres like Stockholm or Gothenberg.

But the full implementation of this process would occur when such languages could be studied, perhaps in an immersion fashion, throughout school parallel to English or French. At least it appears that the new era in schools on Canadian reservations will bring such an opportunity for many, and may provide a model for the rest of us. Happily as well such work is being both implemented and studied by native Canadians now doing Ph.D.'s in Canadian universities. We should cheer them on and await the results with great expectation.

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