DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 074 859 FL 004 103

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TITLE Ethnic Values and Language Learning.
INSTITUTION Pennsylvania State Modern Language Association.
PUB DATE 72
NOTE 4p.; Paper presented at the Fall 1971 conference of the Pennsylvania State Modern Language Association, St. Francis College, Loretto, Pa.
JOURNAL CIT Bulletin of the PSMLA; v51 n1 p12-15 F 1972

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Factors; Cultural Interrelationships; Cultural Pluralism; Ethnic Grouping; *Ethnic Groups; *Ethnic Stereotypes; *Ethnology; Native Speakers; Second Language Learning; Second Languages; *Sociocultural Patterns

ABSTRACT

Sociocultural implications of ethnicity are explored in this paper. Three main questions are discussed: (1) What is ethnic?, (2) Who wants to be ethnic?, and (3) Why be ethnic? The author notes that in 1960 the ethnic diversity of the U.S. population was such that some 185 foreign language newspapers, 1,660 radio programs broadcast in the foreign language, and 194 ethnic schools existed. (RL)

ETHNIC VALUES AND LANGUAGE LEARNING*

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It is very difficult for people like us who do not belong to the culture of poverty to be considered ethnic. Americans tend to believe that nobody really wants to be ethnic and that if only we can procure everyone a good education and a good job, in time ethnicity will disappear.

Front-page stories about the so-called ethnic backlash—discrimination in housing and in labor unions and, more recently, anti-busing strikes—have hardly enhanced the public image of minority groups, in particular second- and third-generation families now fairly comfortably established in middle-class communities. Politicians curry favor with minority groups who, it turns out, should not be viewed as being in a minority after all but rather as being part of the "Silent Majority". In another interesting socio-political alignment, much of the old-stock population is said to have the same values and outlook as their ethnic counterparts, this grouping now being referred to as "Middle America".

Running counter to these notions is the more pervasive idea that Americanization has worked with the masses of immigrants of an earlier day, that nothing of real value has been lost in the process, and that it's merely a matter of time and no doubt the old melting pot will take care of whatever ethnicity remains in our country today in an equally gratifying way.

Three questions deserve a better answer than those implied by the widely-shared views cited above and have a direct bearing on language learning in America today: (1) What's ethnic? (2) Who wants to be ethnic? and (3) Why be ethnic anyhow?

There can be little doubt that the self-image which Americans have continues to be that of a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant people with a few minorities. Yet, according to the United States Census in 1960, nearly one out of every five persons living in this country today belongs to a segment of the population officially designated as "foreign stock", an overwhelming majority of whom claim a non-English mother tongue. If we broaden our definition of ethnic to include people who do not belong to the same race, religion, or nationality as the dominant group—factors generally used when defining ethnicity—the term ethnic may be applied to at least one-third of the population of the United States.[1]

The "ethnic problem" dates only from the nineteenth century with the sudden and rapid growth in immigration from Catholic and Eastern European countries.[2] Instead of becoming readily assimilated as had their Protestant and, for the most part, English-speaking predecessors, these new arrivals set about perpetuating diverse subcultures by establishing their own churches, schools, and political and social organizations. The reaction to all this was quick and, for a time, extremely effective. From 1852 to 1860, for example, a secret political party called the Know-Nothings sought actively and openly to prevent foreign-born citizens from holding public office and to counteract so-called foreign influences and ideas. It succeeded remarkably well in New England, the South, and West, until the eve of the Civil War and the emergence of the Republican Party, electing governors and legislatures, as well as local officials in these areas.

If the initial influx of immigrants was cause for concern in the first half of the nineteenth century, the problem became even more acute in the decades which followed with the arrival of some ten and a half million immigrants in the thirty years between 1860 and 1890, then twelve and a half million in the twenty years which ensued. From 1910 to 1914, an average of more than a million aliens landed in America every year. Aggravating the issue to a considerable degree was the fact that the immigrants came increasingly from Southern and Eastern Europe, worshiped, ate, and dressed in strange ways, deliberately settled in urban ghettos, and, above all, spoke a babel of tongues. In short, the immigrants behaved in a most undesirable and suspicious way. While immigration declined sharply during World War I, the volume of arrivals again rose rapidly in the 20's, nearly approximating the pre-war peak.

This influx met with growing hostility.[3] It was the era of pseudo-scientific studies showing the Irish, the Poles, the Italians, the French-Canadians, and so forth, to be mongrelizing the population, and the Jews and Catholics to be plotting the overthrow of the government or undermining the economy. These people were said to be intellectually inferior and morally degenerate. Statistics were adduced to show the relatively high incidence of criminality among the immigrant groups.

The upshot, of course, was the quota system which was enacted into law in 1921. With the advent of the Great Depression immigration was sharply curtailed and, save for a few exceptions immediately following World War II, the Hungarian Revolt, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, it has remained subject to tight controls to this day.

Oscar Handlin, in a Pulitzer-Prize-winning history entitled *The Uprooted* (1951), has aptly characterized the saga of the European immigrants, the chief episodes of which are: rural life

* Delivered at the Fall Conference (1971) of PSMLA.

From: Bulletin of the PSMLA, Vol. 51, No. 1, Fall 1972.

in the Old Country, the long and arduous voyage, Ellis Island, and the city ghetto.[4] Most of us tend to believe that what followed was eventual assimilation through education and through geographical and social mobility, especially of the children and grandchildren of the immigrants, with the result that little distinguishes them today from the progeny of the original stock. This is true, of course, in the majority of cases, but a remarkably large percentage of second- and third-generation Americans stay ethnic and take deliberate measures to remain so.

I do not refer here to the ignorant or to the otherwise disadvantaged who, because of their inability to speak English or their lack of education or basic skills, develop a defense mechanism against the society which has no place for them. I do not allude here either to the alienated who, for a variety of reasons, many of them obscure, cannot or will not participate in contemporary Amercan life. I speak rather of the substantial number of Americans of all classes and milieux who are working today at preserving their ethnic heritage.

Religion, of course, comes immediately to mind as one of the things people value in spite of what the majority believes. But ethnocentered individuals also continue to adhere to certain ways of thinking, customs, traditions and, above all, remain loyal to their mother tongue generation after generation. The extent of language loyalty among ethnic groups in America was scarcely suspected until about 1964, when Professor Joshua A. Fishman of Yeshiva University undertook a vast project for the United States Office of Education and succeeded in establishing for the first time the remarkable extent of this survival. Here are a few statistics from this report.

In 1960, ethnic newspapers were appearing weekly in the United States in the following languages: French 8, Spanish 10, German 29, Yiddish 2, Hungarian 19, Ukrainian 2, Italian 12, Polish 18, Greek 3, Czech 9, other Slavic 20, etc., for a total of 188 weekly newspapers directed toward specific ethnic groups. Incidentally, great care was taken not to include professional or foreign journals in these totals. There were, in addition, no fewer than 106 monthlies, plus 377 appearing less frequently than on a monthly basis, plus 214 English-language publications directed toward a particular ethnic minority.[5]

In the same year (1960), 83 stations broadcasted in French an average of three hours per week; other languages used in broadcasts with a specific ethnic audience in view includes: Italian 229, Spanish 363, Portuguese 48, Rumanian 7, Polish 203, Ukrainian 32, Russian 28, Greek 86, German 129, Yiddish 42, etc., for a grand total of 1,622 stations broadcasting an average number of five hours per week in a foreign language.[6]

Fishman identified, located, and corresponded with some 464 ethnic organizations active in the United Sates today, groups sponsoring social or cultural activities of various sorts, usually utilizing their mother tongue at least part of the time: Polish 41, French 37, Italian 12, Spanish 6, German 33, to name some of the better-known languages, but also Albanian 3, Armenian 7, Croatian 3, Estonian 21, and so on, each of these separate societies meeting on a regular basis.[7]

The single most important ethnic organization maintaining ethnic identification in America today is the ethnic school. Fishman listed statistics on no fewer than 194 all-day schools, the largest number being Polish with 58 schools, followed by Slovak with 31, French 28, Italian 24, and German 10, but also Croatian, Czech, Hungarian, Jewish (i.e. those teaching Yiddish and Hebrew), Lithuanian, Rumanian, Ruthenian, Slovene, Spanish, and Ukranian. Data was also provided concerning 92 part-time weekday schools and 34 weekend schools. Once again, these figures represent ethnic elementary and secondary school programs only and carefully omit foreign-language instruction in the public schools.[8]

In 1960, finally, 1,935 of the 23,346 Roman Catholic parishes in the United States were officially designated as ethnic parishes; that is, at least some of their activities—typically sermons, confessions, and communal prayers—were conducted in the mother tongue. There were, for example, 441 Polish-American parishes, 343 Ukrainian and Ruthenian, 330 Italian, 166 German, 153 Slovak, 104 French, 99 Lithuanian, 36 Mexican, etc.[9]

In short, the ethnic establishment in the United States represents a vast expenditure of time, money, and energy. It exists for the sole purpose of preserving the mother faith, language, and concomitant cultural values.

Fishman has also, whenever possible, charted the rise and fall since 1900 in the number of such ethnic manifestations. The attrition has been very great and a good many ethnic leaders and organizers are no longer in their prime. On the other hand, numerous elementary school and social programs are demonstrating a remarkable vitality and, rising to the challenge of the times, are responding to the needs of the younger generation.

Only someone who belonged to an ethnic parish as a youngster, attend ethnic elementary and secondary schools, whose friends and neighbors throughout his adolescent years belonged to the same group, and who graduated from a small college whose entire faculty and student body were drawn almost to a man from the same ethnic milieu can appreciate how culturally rewarding such an experience can be, but how utterly narrow and provincial, too. It takes a while to learn to discriminate the good from the bad features of such an upbringing. Naturally, not everyone having undergone a comparable experience wishes to remain ethnic. Self-hatred and the desire to disassociate oneself completely from one's ethnic background and to compensate for its deficiencies are well-

known second- and third-generation characteristics in America.

One of the most serious problems encountered by the ethnic child is that of the mother tongue.[10] Television and other communications media exert a cultural and linguistic force upon us all, but particularly the young, which no degree of ethnocentrism—family, church, or neighborhood—can effectively counteract; so chances are the child will be exposed to his mother tongue but often never really masters it. If he goes to a public school in a mixed community where English is used exclusively and his mother tongue and culture are looked down upon, he soon develops a block about the latter. And when the time comes to learn his mother tongue in a formal language course, in all likelihood his teacher feels that the central problem is how to counteract the influence of the home environment. A scientifically-based and genuinely sympathetic understanding of linguistic, psychological, and cultural factors involved in assisting ethnic youngsters learn their mother tongue, especially its standard form, can make all the difference in the world, but, unfortunately, is rarely encountered in the classroom.

I have answered at some length the first two questions posed at the outset, and I have suggested all along part of what I am about to say now in reply to the third. Why, indeed, be ethnic?

The most direct answer one can give to that question involves a paradox, for, in a very real sense, to find one's ethnic roots is to discover one's American heritage. The semantic evolution of the motto *E pluribus unum* 'one out of many' is significant in this regard. When, on August 10, 1776, a committee consisting of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson chose the Latin phrase which appears on the Great Seal of the United States, it meant one nation made of many states. Very few persons today think of the union of the thirteen original Colonies when these words are mentioned, since they have become associated in the national consciousness with "your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses" who came in what has been termed the Second Great Settlement of America.

The rôle which immigration played in our history is generally recognized, but the melting pot metaphor is also a cherished notion. Central to this concept is the widely-held but rarely articulated view that the melting pot entails not so much adoption of the ideals of the Founding Fathers as assimilation of white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant values and middle-class attitudes.

Lip-service is paid to the cultural pluralism implied by the ethnic phenomenon in America, but until recently very little official encouragement was given to efforts being made by minority groups to preserve their identity. Executive proclamations which enhance the self-image of particular minorities—around St. Patrick's Day and Columbus Day, for instance—were and, more often than not, still are politically-motivated.

Of late, however, more substantial official measures have been enacted, and others are in the offing. Grants have been made under the National Defense Education Act to assess and foster mother tongue loyalty. Fishman's study was federally-sponsored, and there have also been summer institutes for French teachers of Canadian extraction residing in New England, three of which I had the privilege of directing a few years ago.[11] The American Museum of Immigration, now being constructed in the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty National Monument, is scheduled to be opened to the public on March 15, 1972. Last summer I had the pleasure of addressing the energetic staff of the Mascenic Bilingual Program, a team of elementary school teachers, curriculum specialists, and paraprofessional aides engaged in preserving and reinforcing the French language and culture of the schoolchildren of Greenville, New Hampshire, a community which is ninety percent Franco-American. This long-range program involving intensive daily sessions in French as well as instruction in other subjects taught in that language, community involvement, and a liaison unit with similar French/English programs throughout the country, is an Elementary and Secondary Education Act Title VII project.

One of the most interesting recent developments is the bill currently before Congress to establish Ethnic Heritage Studies Centers throughout the land.[12] The bill sponsored by the Honorable Richard S. Schweiker of Pennsylvania has passed the Senate, and corresponding legislation, introduced by Representative Roman C. Pucinski of Illinois, has received the endorsement of the House's Committee on Education and Labor.

Why be ethnic? The 548-page transcript of the hearings held before two Congressional subcommittees in 1970 and 1971 provides eloquent, varied, and more than ample replies to that question.[13] One common theme runs through this lengthy testimony, a plea for understanding and respect. For if ethnic culture is not to be viewed as an aberration, a curious deviation from normal patterns of behavior or from the right way of doing things, it is an even grosser misconception to imagine that the culture of minority groups can be reduced to the quaint costumes, folk dances, and *Gemütlichkeit* seen in a recent series of television commercials for a popular brand of beer. There are, to be sure, important public displays of ethnicity, but by far the most authentic manifestations are private affairs in churches, clubs, and family gatherings.

In what precedes I have stressed the scope, significance, and enduring quality of ethnic life in the United States. Language teachers have much to gain by studying this phenomenon. One of the most valuable aspects of foreign language learning is the insight it provides into the nature of culture.[14] The very process of learning about other people helps us better to understand and appreciate our own culture. The readers of this journal need no convincing on this

score when it comes to the languages being taught in our schools or the foreign cultures with which they are customarily associated. I submit, however, that ethnic American languages and cultures constitute a much neglected source of illustrative and comparative material in these courses. Above all, however, ethnic stereotypes or a patronizing attitude are to be avoided lest efforts in this direction result in more harm than good.

The ethnic revival in America today is no fad. It is often rather a way of expressing the fact that not everything about the prevailing manners and mores is as right as we advertize it to be. Having typically grown away from his own ethnic background, today's student seems instinctively drawn toward the kind of wisdom and continuity with the past that he finds in other people's folk songs or folk ways.

He would do well, in our view, to seek his own roots, study his own heritage. This includes, to be sure, the American achievements and ideals which he has learned about in school and the popular culture which he is in the process of acquiring in American society. But the history, beliefs, traditions, and wisdom of his own forebears also constitute a precious heritage if only he will take the time to investigate them.

The systematic rejection of ethnicity and the pathetic belief that only in traditional middle-class values is there any salvation are among the saddest aspects of the contemporary American scene.

But in the final analysis people choose to remain loyal to certain ethnic values while participating fully in American life simply because they feel such an existence holds the richest rewards for them.

NOTES

1. Joshua A. Fishman, *Language Loyalty in the United States. The Maintenance and Perpetuation of Non-English Mother Tongues by American Ethnic and Religious Groups* (London-The Hague-Paris: Mouton, 1966), Chapter 2, "Mother Tongue and Nativity in the American Population," pp. 34-50.

2. Barbara Miller Solomon, *Ancestors and Immigrants. A Changing New England Tradition* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965).

3. See Edward M. Saveth, *American Historians and European Immigrants 1875-1925* (New York, 1948).

4. Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted; The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People* (Boston: Barton, Little, Brown, 1951).

5. Fishman, pp. 51-74.

6. Fishman, pp. 75-91.

7. Fishman, pp. 156-189.

8. Fishman, pp. 92-126.

9. Fishman, pp. 127-155.

10. Gerard J. Brault, "Some Misconceptions About Teaching American Ethnic Children Their Mother Tongue," *Modern Language Journal*, XLVIII (1964), 67-71.

11. Gerard J. Brault, "The Special NDEA Institute at Bowdoin College for French Teachers of Canadian Descent," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, LXXVII (1962), 1-5.

12. Ninety-First Congress, Second Session, H.R. 14910; Ninety-Second Congress, First Session, S. 23.

13. *Hearings Before the General Subcommittee on Education of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, Ninety-First Congress, Second Session, on H.R. 14910* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970); *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Education of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, United States Senate, Ninety-Second Congress, First Session on S. 659 and Related Bills* (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1971), Part 2, pp. 965-1150.

14. Gerard J. Brault, "French Culture: Some Recent Anthropological and Sociological Findings," *The French Review*, XXXVI (1962), 44.