
American 'multilingualism': A national tragedy

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On Super Bowl Sunday, Toyota debuts what it calls the nation's first "bi-cultural, bilingual" advertisement.

The spot shows a father talking to his son, in English and Spanish, about the benefits of the new car:

"Papa, Why do we have a hybrid?"

"For your future ... It's better for the air, and, we spend less because it runs on gas and electrical power. It uses both."

"Like you, with English and Spanish!"

"Si!"

Toyota vice president Jim Farley says the spot "incorporates the truth that parents are always moving forward in their lives, and we think the commercial will really resonate across cultural lines and show the benefits of our new Camry Hybrid in a touching and effective way."

Toyota's ad agency may realize it's on shaky ground: Papa ultimately tells his son he learned English, too, for the child's future. This end note is nearly laudable, but it does not make the "big idea" of the spot any less misleading. Parents aren't always moving forward in their lives – especially parents that do not have the discipline to allow their children to be immersed, completely and immediately, in the English language. The fruits of our "touching" national love affair with bilingualism are not limited to voice-mail purgatories, non-English speaking local government offices, and billions of tax dollars literally lost "in translation".

Some effects are in fact, deadly: A recent study by the

journal Pediatrics indicates that translation errors between doctors, parents, and patients are common and often dangerous, even when translators are involved. Emergency rooms across the country are plagued by the triage nightmare of "spanglish" (the word intoxicado, for instance, means "poisoned," not "intoxicated"), and OSHA reports yearly increases in the number of Hispanics and immigrants killed on the job, largely because of safety comprehension problems.

Sadly, with every legal and cultural step we take to make life more immediately convenient for non-English speaking immigrants, we merely feed the beast. Chicago's public school system, for instance, holds a mind-boggling fifty-seven thousand English as a Second Language children and consistently ranks "dead last" among the nation's forty-seven largest school districts. Their biggest concern right now? Filling more and more "bilingual special education" positions.

Bilingualism can be marvelous. I have warm memories of my bilingual youth in French-speaking Quebec. I was immersed completely in 6th grade and, as kids will, I became "proficient" in the span of a few months. But let us not fool ourselves, and let's not allow Toyota to believe they're honing in on a qualified demographic. How common is the portrait of a Latino family cruising along in a new, \$25,000 hybrid? According to a recent Federal Deposit Insurance Company study, although Hispanics comprise the country's largest minority group, almost half of them – or twenty million people – have not even opened a bank account.

So let me take you out of a hybridized, high-income fantasy world, for a moment, and paint a few "tou-

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ching” and honest pictures of the state of “bilingualism” in our country. There’s an office janitor in our building with whom I regularly exchange pleasantries. He speaks no English, but he understands my Italian and I understand his Spanish. He is poor, but he is a fast, meticulous, and good-natured worker. I had always imagined him as somewhat indentured, at first to a coyote, perhaps, and now, thanks to a language barrier, to his foreman. But – I learned recently – he has in fact been in this country since he was a baby. Impoverished, unable to scan the “want” ads, but perfectly able to converse with our local Spanish-speaking social services and food stamp officials, he continues to enjoy the fruits of American-style bilingualism.

Let me introduce you to the sweet little girl in my supermarket. She’s standing right next to me, and she’s too small to reach the upper shelf. When I ask her if I can help, she can only stare at me quizzically. She isn’t deaf. She appears to be a normal third or fourth-grader. But she has been permanently disabled in the name of some vague sense of multicultural heterogeneity. I bet you have experienced a moment just like this. I want you to remember that feeling in your heart when you realize you are smiling, in a sense, at a ghost. I want to remind you, in this case, that the misunderstood word is “Help.” How does it feel to know that our tax dollars, our media landscape, and our “feel good” cultural approach to bilingualism are destroying her future?

Despite a Pew/Kaiser poll indicating that 90 percent of Latinos feel they need to learn English to succeed in the United States, California is now touting a “dual immersion” program in which first-grade classes are taught ninety-percent in Spanish. That’s right. Your kids are forced to learn Spanish, while their Spanish-speaking classmates, year by year, are gently weaned off the mother tongue. If, that is, they make it through school that far. In an age in which college education is a prerequisite to the middle class, Harvard’s Civil Rights Project’s latest

report says that Hispanics are dropping out of school at an astonishing – and increasing – rate. Only half of the Latino kids entering ninth grade will actually graduate. And despite national increases in college matriculation, only about one in twelve Hispanics currently enrolled in public school – according to the folks at Harvard, at least – will go on to earn a college degree. One in twelve. How does that feel?

Marketers, ad agencies, and media outlets stretch the truth as a matter of course. It is not done with malevolence. I run a small ad agency. I know how easy it can be to get swept up in the joy of the creative process, and sometimes, in the pleasure of an envisioned reality. Nor do advertising executives – and “executive creatives,” as we are known – generally live in neighborhoods where we see, on a daily basis, the living result of the lie of “bilingualism.” But in this case, the lie is deadly. It’s deadly because it leads us to believe that, despite the accidents and deaths, despite the lost opportunities, despite the skyrocketing expenditures, despite rampant poverty and heartbreak, despite all this, all is well in our “multilingual” nation. All is not well.

Multilingualism is crippling us, individually and collectively. It might feel good, temporarily, to think otherwise, just as it might feel good, temporarily, to think you are saving the earth by purchasing a type of vehicle which – according to Consumer Reports – will probably deliver nineteen miles less, on average, per gallon, under actual driving conditions, than its advertised EPA rating. You should buy whatever car you like. But don’t let those snappy Madison Avenue creatives fool you into feeling good about bilingualism. It is not a cultural boon. It is a national tragedy.