In Plain English: Let’s Make It Official

CHARLES KRAUTHAMMER

Pulitzer Prize–winning columnist and commentator Charles Krauthammer was born in 1950 in New York City to parents of French citizenship. He grew up in Montreal and graduated from McGill University in 1970. The following year he continued his studies in political science as a Commonwealth Scholar at Balliol College, Oxford. In 1972 he moved to the United States and enrolled in Harvard Medical School, earning his M.D. in psychiatry in 1975. In 1978 he joined Jimmy Carter’s administration to direct planning in psychiatric research, and later he served as speechwriter for Vice President Walter Mondale and senior editor at the New Republic. As a journalist, Krauthammer quickly gained a reputation for his clear prose and sound arguments. He is widely recognized and respected for his political and social columns, which appear regularly in the Washington Post, Time, the New Republic, and the Weekly Standard. In 1985 he published Cutting Edges: Making Sense of the Eighties, a collection of his essays. One critic commented that “Krauthammer is at his best when he writes not so much about ‘hard’ politics as about political culture . . . and beyond that about the contemporary social climate in general.”

In the following essay, first published in Time on June 12, 2006, Krauthammer presents the case for making English the official language of the United States. He strongly believes that America’s unprecedented success as a nation can be traced to the unifying force of the English language.

Writing to Discover: Our country’s elected officials are struggling with the question of whether or not to make English our official language. Make a list of the reasons why you think it should or should not be the language of the land for all official transactions.

Growing up (as I did) in the province of Québec, you learn not just the joys but also the perils of bilingualism. A separate national identity, revolving entirely around “Francophonie,” became a raging issue that led to social unrest, terrorism, threats of separation and a referendum that came within a hair’s breadth of breaking up Canada.

Canada, of course, had no choice about bilingualism. It is a country created of two nations at its birth, and has ever since been trying to cope with that inherently divisive fact. The U.S., by contrast blessed with a single common language for two centuries, seems blithely and gratuitously to be ready to import bilingualism with all its attendant divisiveness and antagonisms.
One of the major reasons for America's great success as the world's first "universal nation," for its astonishing and unmatched capacity for assimilating immigrants, has been that an automatic part of acculturation was the acquisition of English. And yet during the great immigration debate now raging in Congress, the people's representatives cannot make up their minds whether the current dominance of English should be declared a national asset, worthy of enshrinement in law.

The Senate could not bring itself to declare English the country's "official language." The best it could do was pass an amendment to the immigration bill tepidly declaring English the "national language." Yet even that was too much for Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid, who called that resolution "racist."

Less hyperbolic opponents point out that granting special official status to English is simply unnecessary: America has been accepting foreign-language-speaking immigrants forever—Brooklyn is so polyglot it is a veritable Babel—and yet we've done just fine. What's the great worry about Spanish?

The worry is this. Polyglot is fine. When immigrants, like those in Brooklyn, are members of a myriad of linguistic communities, each tiny and discrete, there is no threat to the common culture. No immigrant presumes to make the demand that the state grant special status to his language. He may speak it in the street and proudly teach it to his children—but he knows that his future and certainly theirs lie inevitably in learning English as the gateway to American life.

But all of that changes when you have an enormous, linguistically monoclonal immigration as we do today from Latin America. Then you get not Brooklyn's successful Babel but Canada's restive Québec. Monoclonal immigration is new for the U.S., and it changes things radically. If at the turn of the twentieth century, Ellis Island had greeted teeming masses speaking not 50 languages but just, say, German, America might not have enjoyed the same success at assimilation and national unity that it has.

Today's monoclonal linguistic culture is far from hypothetical. Growing rapidly through immigration, it creates large communities—in some places already majorities—so overwhelmingly Spanish speaking that, in time, they may quite naturally demand the rights and official recognition for Spanish that French has in French-speaking Québec.

That would not be the end of the world—Canada is a decent place—but the beginning of a new one for the U.S., a world far more complicated and fraught with division. History has blessed us with all the freedom and advantages of multiculturalism. But it has also blessed us, because of the accident of our origins, with a linguistic unity that brings a critically needed cohesion to a nation as diverse, multicultural and multi-
I speak three languages. My late father spoke nine. When he became a naturalized American in midcentury, it never occurred to him to demand of his new and beneficent land that whenever its government had business with him—tax forms, court proceedings, ballot boxes—that it should be required to communicate in French, his best language, rather than English, his last and relatively weakest.

English is the U.S.’s national and common language. But that may change over time unless we change our assimilation norms. Making English the official language is the first step toward establishing those norms. “Official” means the language of the government and its institutions. “Official” makes clear our expectations of acculturation. “Official” means that every citizen, upon entering America’s most sacred political space, the voting booth, should minimally be able to identify the words President and Vice President and county commissioner and judge. The immigrant, of course, has the right to speak whatever he wants. But he must understand that when he comes to the U.S., swears allegiance and accepts its bounty, he undertakes to join its civic culture. In English.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE READING

1. According to Krauthammer, what has been one of the most important reasons for America’s success as a nation?

2. How does Krauthammer counter those people who believe that “granting special official status to English is simply unnecessary”? (5)

3. What is “monoclonal immigration”? (7) In what ways does monoclonal immigration affect assimilation and national unity? Explain.

4. How does Krauthammer answer the question, “What’s the great worry about Spanish”? (5) What do you see as his greatest fear?

5. Why does Krauthammer believe that “linguistic unity” is so important for the United States at this point in its history? Do you agree with his assessment of the situation? Explain why or why not.

6. What, for Krauthammer, is the difference between declaring English “the ‘national language’” and making English the “‘official language’”? (4) What does he believe the label “official” will mean for future generations?