

Williams traces its origin to *ethnikós*, Greek for nation.

While "ethnic" is often substituted for "minority", "minority" does not always denote "ethnic". Public discourse occasionally includes natives among "minorities"; the official term for isolated Anglophone and Francophone communities is "language minorities"; and since the early 1980s "visible minorities" has denoted non-white, non-aboriginal Canadians. Interestingly, with the emergence of the latter term, "ethnic" is increasingly limited to referring to Europeans of non-British and non-French origins. On the other hand, "immigrants" has become almost synonymous with "visible minorities" — reflecting the increase in newcomers from Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America and their greater difficulty in integrating into the national mainstream.

Hazy definitions

The seeming indifference towards the haze surrounding public definitions of language and culture appears venturesome for a country that debates these issues with periodic intensity. Lacking clarity, the various terms are open to

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manipulation for temporary gains, leaving fundamental problems unresolved. Current usage ostensibly appears to deny Canadians of British, French and native backgrounds heritage, culture and ethnicity and, conversely, places undue emphasis on the other groups' collective identities in underplaying their respective members' individualities. The inconsistent and ambiguous use of words like "heritage", "culture", "ethnic" and "minority" impedes, conceptually and concretely, the "equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins" in Canadian society envisioned by the Multiculturalism Act. It tends instead to place multiculturalism within a bicultural framework. While a homegrown vocabulary is critical to the exercise of national self-definition, Canadians should be wary of becoming entangled in the webs of words that we ourselves weave. ■

Language Learning: The Key to Understanding and Harmony

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Teachers, parents and researchers can give a long list of advantages to be derived from studying a second language.

The incorrect translation of a word may have very well been responsible for the deaths of over 200,000 people. Towards the end of the Second World War, the United States had offered Japan an opportunity to surrender. The Japanese reply contained the word *mokusatsu* which means "withholding comment pending decision". Through mistranslation, the verb *mokusatsu* was rendered as "ignore". As a result, the Allies believed that the ultimatum had been flatly rejected and President Truman ordered the use of the atomic bomb.

Gaffes

Less tragic examples abound. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that General Motors was puzzled by the lack of enthusiasm the introduction of its Chevrolet Nova automobile aroused among Puerto Ricans. The reason was very simple. "Nova" means "star" in Spanish, but when spoken it sounds like "no va" which means "it doesn't go". GM quickly changed the name to Caribe and the car sold nicely.

Linguistic and cultural gaffes made by translators or by non-native speakers have often been a source of chagrin. One recalls the embarrassment President Carter faced when a translator stated that the President "lusted" for Polish women. A more recent situation reported by The Canadian Press involved Montreal's former mayor, Jean Drapeau. The mayor, at the end of a speech in China, urged his audience "to beat up

your brother when he is drunk." The text showed that, in fact, what Mr. Drapeau had said was, "Il faut battre le fer pendant qu'il est chaud."

Cultural meanings

Our ability to communicate effectively is dependent upon our skill in using language. But it is important not only to teach communication but also the cultural meanings of words. Language and culture are inseparable. To teach one means to teach the other. Authors of second-language textbooks must not only identify the *denotation* of words but also, where necessary, the *connotation* of those words and idioms. Where words seem to correspond lexically in their denotation, they may well diverge considerably in their connotations or the emotional associations they arouse. While "bread" and "le pain" may correspond lexically in their denotation, they certainly do not correspond in their connotation. "Bread" is often found in a plasticized wrapping and is soft. The French "pain" brings markedly different associations to mind.

Teachers and parents are quick to recite a whole litany of advantages and benefits to be derived from studying second, or more, languages.

- Second-language students perform better in English than non-second-language students.

- A second language helps students gain greater insight into their own culture.

- The self-concept of second-language students is significantly higher than that of non-second-language students.

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- Studies have shown positive correlation between the study of a second language and the creative functioning of learners.
- A working knowledge of other languages is important for research.
- Reading skills are shown to be transferable from one language to another.
- Second-language learners have larger vocabularies.
- Today's students are career oriented, and they cannot overlook jobs that require second languages. The knowledge of a second or third language increases opportunities.
- The knowledge of the language of a region or country being visited makes travelling more enjoyable.

And the list could continue.

But all these reasons can fall under four major objectives for studying a second language, as outlined by Jan Amos Comenius, Czech writer and humanist (1592-1670):

- *Political*: to serve the nation's interests.
- *Cultural*: to know the culture of another people for one's personal enrichment.
- *Practical*: to be able to communicate in the language of a foreign speaker.
- *Educational*: to sharpen the mind and to shape the personality of the learner.

Heightened abilities

The Canadian researchers E. Peal and W.E. Lambert repeatedly pointed out that learning more than one language heightens the learner's ability to call into play a variety of learning configurations which would otherwise have been limited. "Figuring out" the sound system and grammatical rules in more than one language seems to increase the learner's ability to organize perceptions of reality, to recognize concepts in several different forms and to solve complex linguistic and cultural problems.

Raymond Aron said, "I have always felt that the ability to speak freely in two different languages provides us with a kind of personal freedom that no other means can provide. When I speak

English or German, I don't think the same way as I think in French. This frees me from feeling like a prisoner of my own words."

While the practical and educational values of learning two or more languages are readily recited, what is not as well known is that, as psychological research has now documented beyond any doubt, learning another language brings about a whole series of psychological and affective benefits as a by-product to the practical ones.

Myth

Before going into the kinds of research which pertain to this statement, it is perhaps useful, and probably necessary, to dispel a long-held myth about foreign language teaching, a myth which Marcel Danesi, a professor at the University of Toronto, in several studies has called the "neurological space myth". Essentially, this was a myth which was generated by research on bilingual children during the 1930s, 40s and 50s in the United States and which was connected to socio-cultural variables rather than to psychological ones. The subjects of study were always from lower-class backgrounds which did not stress the learning of languages in the home. Nevertheless, this research gave the impression that the learning of another language, or the retention of the mother tongue as a second language, was detrimental to overall cognition because it was believed, or was hypothesized, that the brain had only so much space in it for language. To put another code into the brain, it was argued, would take away from the space the dominant language needed to be able to function and to operate normally in school environments.

This myth has now been debunked by a whole series of neurological studies which show the exact opposite: that the insertion of another code into the brain, either in the primary ages during childhood or in the secondary stages during adolescence and adulthood, brings with it a reorganization of neurological linguistic operation so that what another code does in the brain helps the brain to function more globally, more holistically and more completely than it otherwise would. Canadian researchers such as W.E. Lambert, Jim Cummins and others have documented this phenomenon in several of their studies.

Social convergence

In a study done a decade ago, B. McLaughlin observed that the research in Canada provides evidence that "bilingual education leads to a more

liberal and enlightened perception of other ethnic groups." Similarly, the research done by Jim Cummins and Merrill Swain of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education finds that heritage language programs, for example, promote inter-ethnic cohesion by allowing ethnically diverse children an opportunity to adapt gradually to a new psycho-cultural way of living. By generating a favourable attitude to one's ethnic identity and background, these programs tend to produce what may be called a "social convergence" effect; that is, they promote cross-cultural understanding by inhibiting a natural tendency to reject cultural modes that might be perceived as being "different".

Other worlds

In learning a second language, students acquire new modes of thought and new ways of behaviour. They begin to understand these new modes and new ways. Understanding leads to acceptance. Acceptance leads to tolerance and diversification of one's world view. As I recently claimed, "Monolingualism *can* be cured", because it is, in a way, a type of cognitive disease. Monolingualism constrains. Monolingualism lessens our viewpoint and our *Weltanschauung*, the personal philosophy of the world. Learning other languages cannot help but diversify and broaden the point of view. Therefore, once we've come to see another person's point of view, we accept the other person. By accepting the other person, we accept that person's culture. Accepting another culture leads to increased tolerance and harmony and, ultimately, to peace in the world. This, after all, was the contention of Alfred Korzybski, the founder of general semantics. The science and theory of general semantics was based on the view that knowing how other people talk is knowing how they think, how they behave, and that this knowledge will lead to acceptance.

Language and unity

This conclusion contradicts the waving placards of demonstrators against the 1988 Official Languages Act: "One language unites, two languages divide." It is, in fact, the opposite: "Two languages unite, one language divides." Only when the study of either official language is depoliticized, only when it is taken out of the political arena and the learning of either language is accepted for its own intrinsic qualities, will we be able, in my opinion, to have linguistic peace and harmony in this country. ■