

HISPANICS IN THE U.S.: RETHINKING THE SPANISH CULTURAL POLICY

IGNACIO OLMOS
Executive Director
Instituto Cervantes New York
dirny@cervantes.es

Abstract: In the coming decades, the United States will become host to the largest Spanish mother tongue (“Spanish native speakers”) community in the world. Spanish language instruction will consequently play a key role in the formation of a new US society based on plurilingualism. This form of linguistic integration must be based not only on an education system that surmounts the customary insularity of the English language, but also on the recognition and strengthening of the common cultural identity among Spanish-speaking countries. Finally, a final appendix deals with the problem of strategic positioning of language and of linguistic institutes in the world: the need for the latter to learn from their host societies, building a solid intercultural dialogue with them as well as the importance of maintaining full independence from the control of political authorities.

Keywords: bilingualism education, Spanish culture, intercultural dialogue, Hispanic cooperation, language learning strategies.

It is evident by now that the most important “battleground” for the future of the Spanish language lies here in the United States. This country was built on a foundation of migratory currents that shaped the melting pot we know today. The Hispanic community however, is historically the first group whose integration in the country has not necessarily been accompanied by an abandonment of the native language. The 55 million Hispanics living in the United States today in general have a varying level of mastery of Spanish. Although in some professional sectors the Spanish language is quickly lost, in others we see a growing biculturalism that at the same time is turning into an asset in regards to professional opportunities. Interestingly the education authorities in the US seem to have realized that continuing English linguistic isolation in a global world no longer makes sense. As a consequence, they have begun to promote the study of foreign languages. Starting in the first years of elementary education, the most demanded language at all levels of education in the US is

ISSN 2283-7949
GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION
2018, 1, DOI: 10.12893/gjcp.2018.1.5
Published online by “Globus et Locus” at www.glocalismjournal.net



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Spanish. It is not only seen as the second language of international communication but it has also been adopted in large parts of the US as what scholars call a functional bilingualism. This is especially true in California, where according to the last census the Hispanic population, for the first time in history, has become the majority.

Today one out of six US residents is Hispanic, as are one out of five students in public schools, and one out of four newborn babies. With every generation, these numbers are projected to increase. This is clearly illustrated by recent studies that predict that the present 16 per cent of Hispanic population (55 million individuals) will grow to a 30 per cent (136 million) in 2044. At that moment the present Caucasian majority will, for the first time, represent under 50 per cent of the whole population in this country. Following these statistics, in 25 years, the United States would become the worldwide largest Hispanic speaking nation, followed by Mexico.

Beyond the growing interest in Spanish that we are witnessing in Asia and in Europe, the growth of a bilingual society in the United States is a decisive factor for the future of Spanish in the world. This is true thanks to the demographic weight that the Spanish speakers in the US represent, as well as the geostrategic value of the United States and its influence on the rest of the world.

Let me now explain how the growth of the global Hispanic cultures is viewed from the perspective of the small country where the language originates: Spain.

Considering that 90 per cent of the Spanish speakers in today's world are not Spaniards, it seems natural that our language can no longer be considered "property" of Spain. When the Cervantes Institute was founded, 25 years ago, we understood this very quickly and adapted our cultural policy. We dedicate more than 50 per cent of our programs to Spanish speaking countries, other than Spain. We also adapted our academic perspective, which resulted in teaching a common Spanish within the classroom that brings together the regional differences among the 23 countries where Spanish is the official language. It is also reflected in our staff of teachers all over the world, originating from a wide range of Spanish speaking nations. In this, the Cervantes Institute has followed the idea of the Royal Spanish Language Academy,

which has created an Association of Language Academies of all Spanish-speaking countries. This Association of Spanish Academies is the one that today provides and validates the Dictionary and rules of spelling and grammar, thus being authentic works of pan Hispanic cooperation.

During its 25 years of existence, the Cervantes Institute has created a prestigious and privileged international network, present in 90 cities throughout 43 countries. The greatest achievement has been to become the eminent institution for the promotion of all Spanish-speaking countries. Nowadays all Latin America looks to Instituto Cervantes as a neutral platform void of any reminiscent colonial association. This is of great value to Spain, following the style of the British Commonwealth or the French Francophonie, in the sense that through Cervantes Institute we have been able to articulate a geostrategic network of Spanish speaking countries which all share an interest in promoting their language through a common cultural patrimony. We don't speak of "Spanish culture" anymore, but of "Culture in Spanish". The great Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes called it, the territory of the region of La Mancha. With this he did not mean the region of Castile in the center of Spain, where the adventures of Don Quixote are located, but the imaginary place, where the dreams and battles of Don Quixote – shared by all Spanish-speaking peoples – take place.

A language with over 550 million speakers and a shared culture in more than 22 countries reflects a clear global interest: Spain represents a moderate power economically, yet is a major power in cultural standing. And here the conclusion is that, as a major cultural power, we understand that the interests of the Hispanics in the world are also our own interests.

Finally, let me briefly talk about the strategic positioning of language, hoping that our experience might be helpful to the idea of the Italian language and culture. This is expertise that we have earned the hard way, through trial and error, but we have also learned a lot from other international institutions such as the British Council or the Goethe Institut.

There are three main aspects: Cultural dialogue, autonomy and double direction.

Let me start with cultural dialogue: First off, our international policy has evolved from a model of cultural promotion to one of cultural dialogue. To analyze the differences between these two

could be the work of a whole doctoral thesis, but in short, our longstanding experience in different centers has taught us that it is best to avoid unilateral presentations that don't take into account the cultural reality of a country and its institutions. It is much more useful to integrate oneself in the concerns and debates of one's host country, contributing to these local discussions with one's own writers, artists and intellectuals. (We do not try to sell a product, but instead to be useful in some way as an active agent in the global conversation.)

I would like to quote Gordon Slaven here, the director of the Education Services of the BC who states: "The first thing that we do in a country is to listen to what the people have to say, what worries them. Then we work from that basis, instead of telling them from the outset what we think they should know. This is the principle of mutuality".

Perhaps the practical example that best illustrates this idea is the series of panel discussions we held on The Future of Hispanics in the United States, in response to the change in political climate that the country is currently undergoing. In these debates Anglo-American writers, academics and diplomats shared the stage with their Hispanic counterparts in open discussions about their common concerns. We have programmed quite a few events like this and they have helped to turn the Instituto Cervantes in Manhattan into a place for intercultural exchange in the city of New York.

The autonomy of public cultural institutions from their respective governments is key to the realization of a long-term cultural policy. This might seem self-evident, but it is not a given in all European countries. In today's global world, credibility and independence are two sides of the same coin. It is the element of credibility – that is only possible through autonomy – which allows us to establish relationships built on trust with other cultural institutes from around the world. The objective declared by the BC today is no longer that of "promote culture" but "build trust".

I would like to conclude with a practical suggestion borrowed from German cultural foreign politics: the concept of the double direction of the Goethe Institut. If we move away from the promotion of culture towards a cultural dialogue, if we present our activities not only as instruments to teach who we are, we also have to be open to learn from the societies in which we are offer-

ing these programs. The idea of the double direction, applied in our international cultural work, will also allows us to showcase in our own country what we have learned abroad, enriching our own societies. Dialogue is not a curtain to hide behind (in order to advance an own agenda); it is in fact a way to better ourselves through contact with others.

EDITORIAL NOTE

This article has not been submitted to the double-blind peer-review process of *Glocalism*, but has nevertheless been published because it is considered an interesting reflection on the current issue's topic.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This text is based upon a lecture delivered at the invitation of the Permanent Mission of Italy to the United Nations for a discussion organized in New York by the editorial board of *Glocalism* on November 13, 2017.

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ISSN 2283-7949

GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION

2018, 1, DOI: 10.12893/gjcpi.2018.1.5

Published online by "Globus et Locus" at www.glocalismjournal.net



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