

# I am the spawn of immigrants

Bill Hall

Sunday, March 29, 2009

I've been wondering how much hostility my immigrant great-grandparents from Denmark had to put up with years ago because they were slow to learn a tough language like English.

They didn't come here ready to roll with a head full of English. So maybe I'm smarter than they were because I've been speaking English since my first birthday, if "Daddy," "Mommy" and "Kitty" constitute an English vocabulary.

On the other hand, it took me several years to develop a full ration of usable English. I didn't really get my little brain and big mouth into speaking gear until I was about 4 or 5. And immigrants, legal or illegal, who come to this country also take considerable time to learn our language.

I have been receiving e-mails lately from easily agitated friends who send me their disapproval of people who arrive from Mexico "and don't have the decency to learn English."

At first glance, that complaint seems to be fair. Most of us, if we moved to another country, would expect and want to learn the language of our new home. I would. In fact, I have managed to get a weak grasp on Italian and Spanish to make visits to some countries easier and more fun.

However, friends who include me on their e-mail lists and send their angry remarks against people from Latin America for not learning English are mistaken. Their complaint is based on an inaccurate assumption. In truth, almost all of the new arrivals want to learn English and are trying to do so. Every time a free or reasonably priced English class opens in this country, it is flooded with Spanish-speaking applicants. It's not true that the newbies refuse to learn English. They need English and they know it.

But what their critics apparently don't know is that learning a language takes time - especially a language as difficult as the one most of us in this country were born into. I could teach you in a week how to spell and pronounce virtually every word you will ever see in Spanish or Italian. But after 71 years of wrestling with English, I still don't know how to spell or pronounce every word that I will ever see in this, my own mother tongue. (Shouldn't that be "mother tung"? And what's with that "gue" on the end of our English tongue?)

I'm guessing most people who send me e-mails jumping on new Mexican neighbors have never learned a second language themselves. If they had, they wouldn't be assuming that it's a simple matter for a person to arrive here from another culture and get a handle on English in less than several years.

People who have struggled with another language know that it takes thousands of hours and several years of study and memorization to become anywhere near fluent. But in truth, virtually all newcomers - including my Danish great grandparents and today's Latino immigrants - eventually do learn the local language. They learn it by studying until their heads ring. They learn it a word at a time from generous co-workers and helpful neighbors. They learn it from their own children - those little language sponges who pick up English from classmates and television, learning four times as fast as thee and me with our old petrified brains.

But they do learn it. Almost all immigrants, regardless of age, learn English.

Assuming they don't would be unfair and a little mean were it not for the fact that the people picking on the immigrants don't fully understand what they are talking about. If they were correct, they would be right to be upset. But they grossly underestimate what a long road it is to learn a language. And they just assume that the Spanish speakers they encounter aren't learning English, that they don't care. So the critics get all huffy and berate the newcomers for allegedly ignoring English.

I suppose that's a gantlet immigrants of all kinds have always had to run, including my Danish great-grandparents. But if I had been around then, I would have said to people picking on my family's immigrants what I say to you e-mailers now - give the new arrivals time and they will do what most of you have not - learn a new language. And they deserve praise for that.

As my great-grandparents might say, "Felicidades, amigos."

(Or something like that. I never had the guts to learn a tough language like Danish.)

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