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Babble on, You English-Only Guys

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<http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps1/EPRU/articles/EPRU-0209-28-OWI.doc>

The scare piece from U.S. English Inc. was sadly predictable.

" . . . If we don't act quickly, America could fast become a nation divided by a babble of confusing, competing languages."

The mailing came to the home of a colleague, who has a non-Spanish surname but who is nonetheless Latina.

(Note to U.S. English: She won't be taking you up on your generous offer to accept her contribution and she won't be signing a petition to make English the "official language of the United States.")

Now the other side of the story. A credible case can be made that the "babble" is really coming from U.S. English.

A new report by author James Crawford for the Educational Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University says the numbers point to rapid language assimilation by immigrants as more the rule than the multilingual morass predicted by U.S. English. He comes to his conclusion relying on the same census data upon which U.S. English relied. Crawford, who writes often on the nation's language wars, did a state-by-state analysis.

"Close scrutiny of the new data suggests that the Anglicization in this country has never been faster," he writes. (You can find his paper at www.asu.edu/educ/eps1/LPRU/features/article5.htm)

In other words, the same data that prompts U.S. English folks to predict the multicultural apocalypse really says that "fluent bilinguals" - folks who report speaking

English at least "very well" - are more than half of minority language speakers.

The ability to monger on the issue of Spanish speakers lies in the way a key census question was worded.

"Does this person (age 5 or older) speak a language other than English at home? (If so) What is this language? How well does this person speak English - very well, well, not well, (or) not at all?"

Nowhere in there are definitions for what constitutes speaking a language other than English. While doing your Spanish homework? Giving instructions to the maid or gardener? To speak to grandma when she visits? All kinda fuzzy.

But consider the question posed in Canada's 1996 census: "Can this person speak English or French well enough to carry on a conversation? What language(s) other than English or French can this person speak well enough to carry on a conversation? What language does this person speak most often at home? What is the language that this person first learned at home in childhood and still understands?"

Much more precise. The result of our question, Crawford says, is to exaggerate the amount of Spanish spoken in the home, this due to ethnic identification and pride. Frankly, we say we speak more Spanish than we really do.

As an example, Crawford cites a Navajo nation study in 1993 that found barely 32 percent of reservation kindergartners proficient in the native language. Yet the 2000 census had 75 percent of residents saying Navajo was spoken in the home.

Something doesn't jibe here and the census figures are likely exaggerating the amount of monolingual Spanish-speakers as well.

For instance, Maryland - Crawford's home - reported more than 11 people speaking Spanish for every 10 folks who reported they were Hispanic.

In any case, Crawford's state-by-state analysis shows that, though the language-minority population is indeed growing quickly, the number of people in this group speaking English is growing nearly as fast.

For instance, in Arizona, the number of people who speak a language other than English in the home grew 76 percent over the decade. But the number of people who reported speaking English very well grew 62 percent.

This would indicate a level and speed of assimilation that should satisfy all those out there complaining bitterly about the Mexicanization of this country, the alleged reconquista. It's just not happening, folks.

The figures indicate more clearly, Crawford finds, that, if speaking English is the standard, Latinos are assimilating.

The English-only people, it seems, are wasting both their angst and their postage.