

FOREWORD

— RAY SUAREZ —

THIS BOOK REACHES your hands at a peculiar time in the life of the United States. Language is no longer just a way to communicate with others, to put muscle and flesh onto thoughts and feelings. No, language has become a battleground, as one group of Americans challenges another's legitimate claim to fully vested ownership of a shared identity.

How I Learned English is a product of a newer kind of immigration, and a newer attitude toward language. There was no *How I Learned English* for Italian-Americans in the 1940s. There was no *How I Learned English* for German-Americans in the 1870s. There is something different afoot. And it's not making everybody happy.

Samuel Huntington, writing in *Foreign Policy* magazine, looks at Latino America and totally misses the night school classes, the endless hours of ads for English-language home study kits, and the struggles and victories of the people in this book. In "Jose, Can You See?" he peers into the future and sees native-born English-speakers as an embattled minority, increasingly marginalized in their own country. "Because most of those whose first language is Spanish will also probably have some fluency in English," Huntington explains, "English speakers lacking fluency in Spanish are likely to be and feel at a disadvantage in the competition for jobs, promotions, and contracts."

How do you say "Trick Bag" in Spanish?

Begin learning the language once you arrive, and at some point you will be told Spanish speakers are not interested in acquiring the language, and even if they're interested, they're not learning it fast enough. Learn the language, and you may end up oppressing your monolingual neighbors because of their mastery of just one tongue.

If you do not demand logic and coherence from these debates about language, you will not be disappointed. Unlike riding a bicycle, ice-skating, or typing, language acquisition involves much more than simple mastery of a skill. As you will see in the pages of this collection, learning a language begins a passage to another way of seeing the world and speaking it into existence. For many of the essayists, embarking on a new journey with English was really the beginning of an encounter, a relationship, a maddening and rewarding wrestling match that, for some, continues decades later.

As American culture reached the remotest corners of the Earth in the decades after World War II, a kind of mass seduction also began. In Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America, I have met people of all ages and circumstances who are attracted, repelled, and fascinated by the very idea of America, an idea that is transmitted in English. The power of English is asserted in every corner of the globe, from nonsensical slogans on the T-shirts of Japanese teenagers (Happy Teen Force Patrol?) to pop songs sung phonetically—uncomprehended—on an Eastern European street corner to the request of a shy Cuban to spend a few minutes practicing the language of Uncle Sam.

The power of English often comes with ambivalence. Along with the access to a wider world that English provides comes hesitation about having to join the club. I don't mean the kind of feeling that causes Americans to ask, "Why do they hate us?" as much as the one that causes people elsewhere to ask themselves, "Is it OK to love them?"

For many of the writers who follow in these pages, the need to learn English was accompanied by wrenching personal circumstances: exile, illness, economic migration, family dissolution. So language was just another challenge for people already up to their young chins in sudden change. For others, it was a proffered ticket to a new kind of membership in the modern and changing world. Along with wrapping your mouth around those hard consonants and struggling to

master those bedeviling “exceptions to the rules” came the promise of an exciting adventure. You can almost taste, touch, and smell the anticipation in the memories of the gifted storytellers that follow.

In the 1980s I once interviewed a community activist in Chicago who was raised in an orphanage after the death of his parents when he was barely out of diapers. “They stole my tongue,” he told me. “They saved my life, but I lost Spanish in the process.” The rueful tone accompanying his life story was striking. Now in his 50s, he could barely remember his parents at all, but the loss of Spanish was palpable for him even now.

How different is that from the regrets of hundreds of thousands of other children of immigrants who grew up with that old ethic, “English above all, the faster the better, and you’ll be able to put away your old life even faster”?

That delicate dance between mastery and loss is very much with us in the stories in this book. It can be seen in the young strivers who work in every spare moment to conquer English, in the children who refuse to speak Spanish to their parents, and in the parents who struggle to speak English to their children. In the end, the questions remain: How American am I going to be? Will I still be that other thing—Puerto Rican, Mexican, Cuban, Peruvian, Honduran?

We may be setting aside that old argument about assimilation. As one Mexican who came to the United States once asked me, “Why would it be good to become less than I am to become an American? I have taken on this new thing, English, but that doesn’t mean I have to put away who I was when I got here.”

The writers in the coming pages tell hilarious stories. They tell sad stories. They tell of wanting to fit in, of desperation to succeed, and of a steady march toward making it in a new society. Sometimes that journey is taken by a family facing similar trials of school, workplace, and the street. For many others, a solo journey starts in the Spanish-speaking world and becomes a voyage of transformation for a nervy adventurer who, by the way, learns English in the process.

Many of the writers, performers, and scholars you are about to read are people I have known as interview subjects and as friends, or whom I have admired from afar for their achievement, skill, and creativity. In their various stories, they tell you something about the millions of Americans whose first language is Spanish or Portuguese. Many now look back on their experiences and see that they are rooted in two places. That's important.

During the ferocious debates to come over the fraternal twins of language and immigration, you will see many native-born and monolingual people fret over the loss of the country they grew up with. It certainly seems to scare the hell out of Samuel Huntington. The transformative power of both America and English acquisition, power that shouts from the pages of this book, is forgotten. That power is lost in the wailing over the coming bilingual dystopia.

Those handwringers might take comfort from this book. In hundreds of pages, there is hardly an inkling that learning English regardless all the craziness on the way there, is not a very desirable skill.

Sure, there are stories of loneliness and isolation that immigrants from anywhere will certainly understand and remember. And sure, there are the petty slights newcomers have faced since the earliest of cross-cultural migrations. There are sad miscommunications right along with the hilarious ones.

Maybe you learned English yourself. Maybe you are struggling to turn those half-remembered phrases from high school Spanish into something more like a functioning language. Either way, you will recognize yourself somewhere in these pages.

Ray Suarez is senior correspondent for *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* on PBS.

INTRODUCTION

— TOM MILLER —

JUST THIS MORNING, a front-page story told of the enormous demand throughout the United States for courses in English as a Second Language (ESL). Immigrants, regardless of their economic, legal, or employment status, know that speaking English increases their potential at work and play. Learning a language as a youngster is easier than as an adult. At any age it can be grueling, painful, aggravating, fulfilling, amusing, instructive, gratifying, and rewarding—sometimes all of these, sometimes all at once.

When my wife came home from her first day in ESL class, I asked what she had learned. “Oh, really?” Regla replied. “That’s interesting.” Her first four words in English showed polite curiosity and superficial nicety. In fact, to everything I asked, she responded, “Oh, really? That’s interesting.” What was the teacher like? “Oh, really? That’s interesting.” Were there many other students? “Oh, really? That’s interesting.” Did you break for lunch? “Oh, really? That’s interesting.” Over the years it’s become a running gag.

Regla’s first ESL class took place at a neighborhood community center that offered free courses as a public service. Her fellow students were mainly the wives of day laborers and of recently arrived *campesinos*. She next took a semester at a university ESL center, where her classmates were doctors, physicists, engineers, economists, and chemists—not the image of typical ESL students, but just as anxious to learn a new language. Finally she completed her ESL studies at a community college.

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instruction laws toward the end of the 19th century, only to repeal them not long after. Some cities, though, did away with bilingual classes altogether and relegated foreign languages to high school instruction only.

When waves of Italian and Eastern European immigrants arrived in the early 1900s, philanthropists underwrote night school English classes, notes James Crawford, an authority on bilingual education, "while indoctrinating immigrants in 'free enterprise' values." Industrialists such as Henry Ford insisted his employees attend loyalty classes, and "an ideological link was forged between language and 'Americanism.'" After the Spanish-American War, an effort to force public schools on the newly acquired island of Puerto Rico to teach only in English was so disastrous that soon the attempt at linguistic colonization was diluted and eventually, after World War II, abandoned.

"We have room for but one language in this country," Theodore Roosevelt wrote ten years after he left the presidency, "and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns out people as Americans...and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house." Roosevelt pushed for more classes for immigrants to learn English, but also "the deportation of those who failed to do so within five years." This attitude got a boost in Nebraska, where, in 1919, the legislature passed a statute that English "become the mother tongue of all children reared in this state." (The U.S. Supreme Court overturned that law four years later in *Meyer v. Nebraska*.)

There isn't just one way to learn English, as the contributors to this collection prove. Most of them built their English on a foundation of Spanish (or Portuguese). And most of the immigrants who tackle English today start with this underpinning. Just 75 years ago, though, the source of most immigration was European. In *The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N*, a droll 1937 entertainment by Leonard Q. Ross, all the students at New York's American Night Preparatory School for Adults came from Germany or Poland. Ross,

the pen name of Polish immigrant Leo Rosten, author of *The Joys of Yiddish*, wrote of one student whose remarkable contortions of the English language constantly bewildered his exasperated teacher Mr. Parkhill. The beguiling and innocent Mr. Kaplan, who always signed his name with asterisks between capital letters, told the class that the plural of blouse was blice, of sandwich was delicatessen, and that among United States presidents were Judge Vashington, James Medicine, and Abram Lincohen.

Upper-class foreigners, in the days when working-class Hyman Kaplan took courses, were taught through a new approach called English as a Second Language. By the 1950s, ESL had spread to all levels to combat “cultural deprivation” and “language disability,” as one account had it.

My own upbringing was entirely in English, surrounded by wall-to-wall books and a surfeit of daily newspapers. When my parents didn't want us to understand them, they spoke household Yiddish. In the late 1960s I moved to the American Southwest, and over the years have often traveled from there into Latin America. In both places, I have met innumerable people for whom English was a second language and have become intrigued with how they acquired this new way of speaking and how it affected their lives. Increasingly my personal and professional friendships developed with those for whom English was not native, as mine was, but another layer. Finally, I married into a Spanish-speaking family and watched in admiration as first my wife, and then my stepsons, learned American English and adapted to its cultural foibles, inexplicable idioms, and linguistic idiosyncrasies.

The contributors to this book are neither culturally deprived nor linguistically disabled. On the contrary, they each have something to contribute to the English-speaking world. Many speak more than two languages. I've always thought that speaking a second language could make you more mentally agile but not necessarily smarter. I've known plenty of people whose lingual was more semi than bi.

Yet by the time someone adds a third language to the mix they're either on the ball or on the run.

The killer in English, as in all languages, is the preposition. Nowhere did this strike me more than in Manhattan, where Regla and I once sublet a fifth-floor apartment in a heavily Dominican neighborhood near 145th Street and Broadway. The building super, whose apartment was situated next to the elevator in the lobby, had posted a sign on his front door, with an American flag near the top. THANK YOU, AMERICA, it read, FOR ALL THAT YOU HAVE DONE TO US. Was ever a preposition so artfully misconstrued?

I rather like the notion of Theodore Roosevelt's polyglot boardinghouse and would be happy to lodge there. I suspect many of this book's contributors would stay there as well. In fact, we may have already done that, dear reader, and what follows just may be a transcript of our multilingual arguments and pontifications going deep into the night. Now *that's* interesting.