

Reasonable safeguard or racist plot?

Professor David F Marshall of the University of North Dakota wrote in *ET6* (Apr 86) about US English, the campaign that is pushing for an amendment to the US constitution that will make English the official language of the United States. Recently *ET* heard from Professor Marshall, who is currently on a Fulbright Scholarship to the University of Nanjing, China. He writes:

'November's elections in California resulted in the most populous state of the Union voting at a ratio of 4 to 1 in favor of making English its official language. Evidently, the voters are seeing the issue as linguistic only, not as what it really is: a nativistic movement against the current minority now assimilating into American society, the Hispanic. However, as Hispanics become more acculturated, they will constitute a major voting block that will be courted by politicians, and the recent gains by the nativistic groups will probably result in a Pyrrhic victory as it has in Illinois, which has English as its official language, but many laws supporting other languages' rights as well.

'In the meantime we can continue to expect more mythologizing about English as an endangered language in the United States, even though an estimated 94% of the population is monolingual in English or is bilingual in English and another tongue.'

A report in the *International Herald Tribune* (William Trombley, 'Michigan spawned language campaign', 21 Oct 86) offers some additional comment on the U.S. English lobby, which was founded by the semanticist and senator S I Hayakawa and the ophthalmologist John H Tanton. Its declared aim is to safeguard English as the language of government and general intercourse, without however destroying the personal language rights of any citizen. However, Trombley makes it clear that Dr Tanton, before he became publicly interested in English, was an enthusiastic proponent of zero population growth in the USA and the restriction of immigration. He was national president of the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) from 1975 to 77.

The US English campaign claims in less

than four years to have picked up more than 200,000 members, half of whom live in California. Trombley quotes Fernando Oaxaca, the owner of the Spanish-language radio station in Los Angeles, as saying: 'The people behind U.S. English and FAIR are a bunch of crazies who came out of the environmental movement and think the environment is damaged by people, especially people different from themselves.'

Trombley adds that an aide to Senator Edward Kennedy has pointed out the ties between U.S. English and FAIR, including overlapping leaderships. The lobby has 'an illustrious board of advisers, including Saul Bellow, the author, Walter Cronkite, the television newsman, and Dr Denton Cooley, the heart surgeon', but 'last week the luster of this group was dimmed somewhat when Norman Cousins, the author and editor, resigned, stating that Proposition 63 [the basis of the Californian referendum] might cause racial minorities to be "denigrated and demeaned".'

Tu quoque

In a 'letter from Madrid' to the new British daily, *The Independent* (15 Dec 86), Tim McGirk describes a revolutionary upheaval among the pronouns of Spanish, not unlike the democratization of Swedish pronouns described by Brita Haycraft in *ET7* (July 86). McGirk says it all began with the shop girls, and *tu* is winning over *usted* for the second person singular, in a Spain now far removed from the tight formality of the Franco era. 'It was not front-page news, but all of a sudden, the Prime Minister, Senor Felipe Gonzalez, was *tu*. It was liberating. Nobody could imagine General Franco ever being called *tu*, even by his own children.'

But it is evidently more than a question of informality and greater democracy, because the standard *usted* with its echoes of past 'your graces' and 'your honours', became something of an insult, used with irony when conversing with people you consider beneath you. Says McGirk: 'Spanish philologists have noticed that speech began to loosen up in the mid-70s after the death of Franco . . . The flag-wavers of *tu-ismo* were, along with the shop girls, the union men and the students. . . . Under Socialism it is gauche to be dismissive of the working-class', and also risky to sound ironical with them. The result: more and more Spaniards are taken refuge in the singular.

Learners' lib

Do students of a language like English have certain inalienable rights? Dr Francisco Gomes de Matos argues that they do, and has presented his case in both the *Tesol Newsletter* in the United States (Apr 86) and the *EFL Gazette* in the United Kingdom (Oct & Dec 86), two leading disseminators of ideas and news in the world of teachers of English as a foreign language.

Dr Gomes de Matos, professor of linguistics at the University of Pernambuco in Recife, Brazil, asserts that educators often overlook the rights of students. For him, language courses cannot be properly 'humanistic' – a buzzword of some years' standing in EFL circles – until their creators and instructors accept that students have the right:

- to instruction in the national variety of English of their choice (say, American as

opposed to British, or vice versa)

- to use their mother tongues in the classroom (as for example when an explanation is needed)
- to choose whether to answer orally or in writing (or vice versa)
- to have a dictionary handy, even in an examination
- to negotiate language-learning contracts which specify their rights as well as their needs.

In effect, under such contracts teachers would no longer be free to insist on particular methods and sequences, but would have to discuss with prospective students the mix of options that might work best for those students. – *à la carte* as opposed to *table d'hôte*.

CILT Sources and Resources

CILT, the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and research (Regent's College, London) has just produced a resource book on English as a second language in the United Kingdom. It contains lists of organizations, associations and publications relating to ESL, educational issues, social concerns, race relations, immigration, minority language communities, methodology,

courses and centres for teachers, teaching materials and bibliography, as well as comments on and responses to the Swann report. *English as a Second Language: Sources and Resources*, compiled and edited by June Geach, is priced £3.50 + postage and packing. Orders with remittance should go to: CILT, PO Box 573, London NW1 4SU, England.