

From Assimilation toward Accommodation in Montgomery County

Dr. Joan Rubin¹

Presented at Linguapax World Congress on Language Policies
Barcelona, Spain, April 16–20, 2002

The most recent census of the United States shows radical changes in diversity statistics. During the 1990s the United States population grew by 33 million; about 1/3 were immigrants. The 11.3 million or 57% increase in the total foreign born population in just one decade is almost without precedent in American history, both numerically and proportionately.² In March, 2000, an estimated 10.4 percent of the U.S. population was foreign born, up from 7.9 percent in 1990.³ These non-citizens came from 208 countries around the world. According to the 2000 census, nearly 1 in 5 Americans do not speak English at home and more than 10.5 million said they speak little or no English.⁴

¹ Contact information: Dr. Joan Rubin, 2011 Hermitage Avenue, Wheaton, MD 20902
Or: j.rubin@erols.com

² Center for Immigration Studies, Census Release, 2001

³Profile of the Foreign Born Population in the United States: 2000. Current Population Reports, U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau., Issued December 2001).

⁴ Washington Post, August 6, 2001, page A1.

As the fifth most common U.S. destination for immigrants, the Washington metropolitan area has a considerable ethnic and linguistic diversity. In this paper, I will focus on a major suburb of Washington, Montgomery County which with a population of 873,341 is the size of a small city.⁵ The county's population has seen a tremendous growth in the past decade, growing over 15% from 1990 to 2000. During this period, the area has changed dramatically. It is no longer the homogeneous largely European American county it was for so many decades. In Montgomery County, the number of foreign born went from approximately 5% of the population to 25% of the population.⁶ Today, one of every 9 persons is either Latino or Hispanic. The Asian population grew by 60% since 1990 and at 98,651 constitutes 11.3% of the total 2000 county population. The Hispanic population grew by 80.6% since 1990 and at 100,604 accounts for 11.5% of the 2000 population. Currently, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Portuguese, French, and Russian are the most frequently used languages in the county, in addition to English.

However, more than 130 languages are now spoken in the community.⁷

Montgomery County Philosophy and Techniques to Address Diversity

⁵ United States Census 2000 Release ([http://www.mc-mncppc.org/factmap/census_2000/countywide/section .htm](http://www.mc-mncppc.org/factmap/census_2000/countywide/section.htm))

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder

⁷ "Language Links, September, 2001, page 1.

Montgomery County has been very proactive in responding to these changes in the composition of its inhabitants. It has moved from the traditional American assimilation philosophy to a recognition that inhabitants have needs which must be met and respected. The goal of the county appears to be to provide “barrier free access to its citizens.”⁸ The Public Library system has been particularly welcoming to its patrons and has a philosophy of “Always Be Inclusive”⁹ The newly created Charles W. Gilcrist Center for Cultural Diversity has a “commitment to provide an open, supportive, and hospitable environment that affirms the County’s multicultural community and fosters a sense of belonging among all those who make up our community.” The Human Resource Department states that its philosophy is “Every person deserves respect”¹⁰ The Arts and Humanities Council in its 2001 vision monograph specifically states among its shared values is: “Our diversity and the sharing of that diversity.”¹¹ The Police Department Office of Community Outreach has looked at the people they serve and asking themselves “How do we meet the needs of those who are underserved.”¹²

Given this underlying vision, what are the techniques and strategies that Montgomery County has used to ensure that its inhabitants are included and well served? After surveying many agencies in the County, there appear to be several techniques used to help implement this philosophy. These include:

8

⁹ Parker Hamilton, personal communication, February 28, 2002

¹⁰ Sylvia Jarquin, personal communication, February 22, 2002

¹¹ Pg 23, Creative Montgomery. A Vision for the Arts and Humanities in Montgomery County May 2001.

¹² Ron Clarkson, personal communication, March 11, 2002

- Conducting a needs assessment
- Maintaining an Outreach Staff to provide input to planners about issues facing diverse ethnic communities
- Inclusion of all the stakeholders in the planning process
- Cooperation among agencies, both public and private
- Making information, training, and services available in multiple languages in print and video and as needed, through translation
- Maintaining a resource directory of translators and translation services
- Providing information through a wide variety of venues (fairs, churches, media, community groups)
- Providing incentives by compensating employees for language services
- Providing courses in Spanish to employees
- Using feedback mechanisms to evaluate services.

Actions of Diverse County Agencies

COUNTY EXECUTIVE'S OFFICE

The County Executive has maintained an Office of Community Outreach since 1987. The Office has three sections: Hispanic, Asian, and African American. Their mission is to ensure meaningful access to county services. In particular, they want to foster conditions that permit equal access to information and services, to identify needs and problems and recommend appropriate responses, and to disseminate information that will facilitate understanding of the County's policies, operations, and programs.¹³ To do this, this office serves as a bridge between

¹³Mission Statement, Office of Community Outreach.

government and the ethnic communities. They provide county information to Asian and Hispanic residents in several languages and they bring information about community needs back to the County Executive. Information is provided by publishing critical information in the most frequently used languages. For example, information about 911 (emergency services) and bioterrorism is available in Spanish, Mandarin, and Korean. In addition to booklets and pamphlets about critical topics, there are also press releases to ethnic newspapers, radio, and television and a regular cable program in Spanish.¹⁴ Some issues which this office has addressed include scam artists who misrepresent themselves as county officials in order to promote specific contractors or complaints about the way police-community interactions are handled.¹⁵

In September, 2001, the County Executive established a new center, the Charles W. Gilchrist Center for Cultural Diversity as the central point of contact to County and other community services. As part of its programming, the center has a New Americans Welcome Area which will focus on the needs of new immigrants and newcomers to the County. Programs will include basic legal assistance, housing assistance, an extensive Information and Referral System, as well as classes in English as a Second Language and Citizenship. The Center is a central clearinghouse distributing pamphlets in many different languages from all the agencies of the county. In addition, the Center is in the process of connecting with the community through a variety of outreach techniques: talking to community organizations, talking to Parent-Teacher

¹⁴According to Choryan Kwon, Asian Affairs Liaison, there are 3 Vietnamese, 10 Chinese, and 8 Korean newspapers in the Metropolitan Washington area.

¹⁵Ron Clarkson, Director, Office of Community Outreach, March 11, 2002.

organizations at schools, and providing information at fairs for health care and child care.

In the Volunteer Office of the County, a Language Bank was established in 1996. It has a list of 70-80 volunteers who are ready to translate for County offices and non-profit organizations within the County into approximately 30 languages. Recent statistics show that this Language Bank is increasingly being used. The most requested languages are (in order) Spanish, Vietnamese, Mandarin Chinese, Korean, Russian and French. In addition, the County includes a resource called "Language Links" on its web page which lists types of translation resources for use by Montgomery County employees.¹⁶

POLICE

The County Police Department has maintained a Community Liaison Office for about thirty years, with three sections: Hispanic, Asian, and African American. Their services include providing information about crime prevention through brochures, presentations to schools, community groups, and churches and at job and health fairs, and through television, newspapers, and radio stations. They are also called in to intervene when there is an interethnic conflict. In addition, the Community Liaison Office is sensitive to the issues of each ethnic group and attempts to address these.

At one local police district, the commander¹⁷ maintained a list of officers who spoke another language, offered a course in survival Spanish to its officers, used a language bank¹⁸ and

¹⁶ These include certified county employees, Andrews Air Force Base, the AT and T Language Line, the Volunteer Center and outside vendors.

¹⁷ Captain John King, personal communication, December 21, 2001.

¹⁸ The American Telephone and Telegraph Company offers immediate language translation services in most languages for a fee. Also, Andrews Air Force Base in Metropolitan D.C. has a language bank.

presented a video in Spanish dealing with issues of assimilation (e.g. drinking in public) to community groups.

LIBRARY

The library system has been quite proactive in trying to reach those county residents who were not being served because of lack of knowledge of English as well as those who traditionally have not used libraries. In January, 2001, they created a M.O.T.I.V.E. (Multicultural Outreach Initiative) to reach out to those non-traditional library users. The purpose of M.O.T.I.V.E. is to use a systematic approach to increase the number of patrons from the multicultural community. This approach intends to provide the community with “the tools to advance in a complex society which may or may not be foreign to them.” Critical to this effort is the building of inter-institutional partnerships.

The approach taken by the library is perhaps the most comprehensive of all the agencies in the County. They start with the premise that in order to recruit, retain, and train multiethnic patrons, they need to change their traditional models, they need to change traditional attitudes and behaviors which are barriers to helping multiethnic patrons not familiar with the Public Library.¹⁹

A wide variety of activities were instituted to effect this change. In January, 2001, a community field survey at several libraries was conducted to determine how the libraries could improve its services and programs. The coordinator also conducted community workshops to inform the public about services and programs available in the County. Their goal is to “facilitate the development and well-being of the community by “Bringing the County Closer to

¹⁹M.O.T.I.V.E. Annual Report 2001 prepared by Dr. Gilbert A. Zelaya II.

You.” ”

Then, the coordinator visited over 30 schools to consider how to bridge the gap between public schools and libraries. The coordinator also developed a close working relationship with various County agencies which provide direct public service to county residents. In this collaboration, the library co-sponsored workshops in several languages on the following topics: Immigration, School Violence, Proposal Writing, Child Care, Computer Skills. M.O.T.I.V.E. also conducted workshops in 7 different languages to educate the public about the services that the library offers and to change the perception of a library as a place used only by academics. In order to make the library a friendlier and more easily navigable place, library staff wear buttons which say “I speak...”, there is signage at the information desk, check out and check in desk in a variety of languages, and there are maps around the library to help patrons navigate the facility. The form to register for a library card has also been translated into several languages. Through a series of community focus groups, the coordinator surveyed the community to ask what kind of books they wanted in the library collection. They also queried the community about the convenience of their hours of operation, the programs and services offered, and quality of services. The intent is to be as sensitive as possible to community needs and to make library use as simple as possible. One measure of the success of these efforts is the increase in the number of non-traditional patrons. In 2001, the number of new patrons was 1, 507.

Other endeavors to increase access to the library include courses in Spanish; for those with no Spanish, a fifteen-week course in basic “library Spanish” was provided. At some libraries, there are now book discussion groups in Spanish and Chinese.

HUMAN RESOURCES

In the late 1980's the County realized that they needed to serve the extraordinary increase

of immigrants in a new way; that these inhabitants had different needs and issues to be served. A Task Force was developed and one outcome of this task force was the decision to create a network of employees county wide who spoke a foreign language to serve that non-English speaking population. This skill was of particular importance in offices where there is direct public contact. A certification test was developed and those individuals who passed the test and whose offices had nominated them as multilingual employees now receive extra compensation for their skills. As of this date,²⁰ in a County with 7,000 employees, some 270 are certified and receive extra compensation.²¹ For those languages for which there is no multilingual employee, supervisors can refer to an internal website list of certified private interpreters. The goal of the county is to present a County face that is caring where residents are respected and feel they can trust the government.

EDUCATION

The school system has a complex job to facilitate education for children speaking 140 languages from Kindergarten to the 12th grade.²² The ESOL/Bilingual Services office is charged with helping to make the transition to school as smooth as possible for both children and parents.

Whereas the County serves a population of approximately 135,000 children each year, approximately 10,000 of these are in an ESOL program. When non-English speaking children

²⁰Sylvia Jarquin, February 22, 2002, personal communication

²¹The languages which are covered by multilingual employees include: Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, Sign Language, French/Creole, Italian, Portuguese, Hindi, Nepali, Cambodian, Farsi, and Russian.

²²Robert Talbot, Instructional Specialist, Office of ESOL Bilingual Programs, March 7, 2002.

first come to school they are assessed and a determination is made about the level of ESOL the student requires. If after a year a student shows particular learning difficulties, they are referred to the Bilingual Assessment Team where students are tested in their native language to determine any learning disabilities they might have. At the moment, there is only one transitional bilingual course at the high school level, that is, a course in United States History.

There are a variety of services to help parents become familiar with the County educational system and to be able to help their child derive maximum benefit from it, many of which are offered in the native language of the parent. The guide, A Handbook for Students and Parents from Other Cultures, produced by the County, is available in several languages, other than English. This guide has as its objectives: (a) To let students and parents know about the array of instructional programs and services available, (b) To inform parents about school rules and regulations, and (c) To encourage parents to participate in the school community. There are Parent Specialists who offer a course in Spanish to describe the school system and how parents can get involved in their child's education. The ESOL Parents Center aims to reduce the linguistic barriers so that parents can participate in the education of their children.²³ When teachers have a conference with the parent about their child, a bilingual translator is hired to help with the conference. The ESOL office has also created a video in several different languages to explain the ESOL programs to families and to inform them about a special kind of class which may be confusing to parents. In this class, students are given information about nature and the

²³ Research has shown that parental involvement in children's education impacts student achievement. Cynthia Brilliant documents the impact of the Montgomery Parent Center on involvement. "Parental Involvement in Education: Attitudes and Activities of Spanish-Speaking Parents as Affected by Training" Bilingual Research Journal, Summer, 2001.

environment and sleep over at nature centers. Schools also have an outreach coordinator to clarify student behavior expectations, school forms, legal issues (such as truancy), and subsidized meals. Most printed materials that are sent home to parents are translated into three languages: Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese.²⁴ A newspaper about school events and issues is published in eight different languages every three months. Schools also promote literacy by offering opportunities for grandparents to read to their grandchildren in their native language in some Montgomery County libraries.

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

After receiving a high number of inquiries asking for assistance in languages other than English, the Health and Human Services Department contracted to have a survey²⁵ “to enhance the Department’s ability to serve the growing Hispanic communities in the County.” The Survey, conducted over a three month period, aimed to (a) Review how HHS serves Hispanic customers, inventory current HHS services, and improve HHS service delivery to Hispanic communities and (b) Strengthen and expand HHS relationships with the many Hispanic organizations that have the potential to join HHS in serving the growing Hispanic communities.

Among the recommendations of the Survey, there were several that referred to language.

²⁴ Professor Amy Mazur, personal communication, February 28, 2002.

²⁵ Called The Hispanic Customer Service Initiative

The Survey noted that there is an uneven distribution of Spanish-speaking workers and as a result, “hard to reach Hispanic customers needing basic health and human services cannot access available services.”²⁶ The Report recommended that there be a review of the workforce capacity to deliver programs/services to Hispanic customers and to develop and in-house directory of bilingual staff to facilitate intra-agency referrals of Spanish speaking customers. Following this recommendation, it was reported that in 2001, HHS “increased the number of bilingual and bicultural staff in Child Welfare Services..” and hired two professional staff who are Hispanic. As a result, the Center “now has the capability of serving customers who speak English, Spanish, Farsi, French, and Ethiopian languages.”²⁷ Another recommendation was to develop and implement a consistent media strategy. The rationale for this was that “a large number of Spanish-speaking individuals and families do not know about available services—either because of limited speaking or comprehension of the English language.”²⁸ Following this recommendation, the Department noted that in 2001, that it had “developed and distributed the HHS Spanish Service Brochure,” “published resource booklet in Vietnamese on services for the aged and disabled,” “made quarterly presentations on Spanish language radio station (sic) to inform Hispanic seniors and their families about services available to them in the County,” and developed HHS guidelines for publications that include consideration of translation into languages other than English.²⁹ The Department has also produced brochures about (a) Working

²⁶ Hispanic Customer Service Initiative Report, March 24, 1999, page 7.

²⁷ Diversity Works Office of Human Resources, page 70, Fiscal Year 02.

²⁸ Hispanic Customer Service Initiative Report, March 24, 1999, page 11.

²⁹ Diversity Works Office of Human Resources, page 69 and 70, Fiscal Year 02.

parents Assistance programs, (b) Child Care programs, and (c) Mental Health programs in several languages. They have worked to develop language appropriate signage in all of their offices.

In addition, Joe-Heiney Gonzalez, Hispanic Customer Service department of HHS, spearheaded an effort to address several Hispanic issues³⁰ through an entity called the Up County Latino Network. This group aims to bring together several government agencies and non-governmental agencies (for example, churches, Hispanic Alliance, Casa de Maryland) so they can identify problem areas and potential ways to collaborate. Repeatedly, the group identified language difficulties and lack of Spanish-speaking workers in both the public and non-profit service agencies. Often this resulted in strained relationships and lack of knowledge about possible services for which they were eligible. The Network has been working since August 10, 1999 to address many of these concerns. They have produced a resource directory of services in Spanish and a brochure about immigration.

COOPERATION AMONG AGENCIES

Increasingly, agencies are working together to address some common concerns. An article in the local paper, The Gazette, April 3, 2002, described how the Montgomery County Police Community Relations Unit works to make interactions with the public less confusing and threatening. The departments of ESOL, Montgomery County Public Schools, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the victim assistance program of the police department held the third in a series of public safety meetings in Spanish. The goal is to facilitate a working core of police, school and HHS to address common issues in the Latino community. The meeting

³⁰ Issues include housing, mental health, legal immigration, community education and outreach, and adult ESOL. Personal communication, Joe Heiney-Gonzalez, February 18, 2002.

stressed safety tips and knowledge of rights.

OTHER AGENCIES

Every agency in the County is expected to address its language issues and to ensure that their customer base is served. We have covered some of the largest and most active departments but an itemized list of activities in each department is available in the annual Office of Human Resources document, Diversity Works. The major concern of some agencies these days is coordination of services. Several agencies have attempted to develop this kind of overview, most notably the Department of Health and Human Services.

Actions of Non-County Agencies

STATE

Several entities outside of the County also address language issues. The State of Maryland, comprised of numerous counties, offers the driver's license exam in Spanish, and produces informative brochures in several foreign languages (e.g. Maryland Crime Prevention and Domestic Violence Prevention). In addition, state courts provide certified translators for all court cases. The Public Defender's office, which provides free legal assistance to those who are financially needy, has several lawyers who can conduct interviews in Spanish. In addition, staff members in this office speak French and Urdu.

NATIONAL

Regulations and activities at the National level can also impact the County. An Executive Order (13166) signed on August 11, 2000 by then President Clinton had as its goal "Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency." As part of this

order, President Clinton provided that when an agency receives federal funding, that their services shall be consistent with the LEP (limited English proficiency) guidelines. These guidelines set forth the compliance standards that recipients of Federal financial assistance must follow to ensure that the programs and activities they normally provide in English are accessible to LEP persons. The full impact of this order has not yet been felt, but it will definitely have implications in many of the County's departments.

Other national programs that affect County residents include brochures in several foreign languages by the National Crime Prevention Council, brochures and signage at National Parks in the County, a summer program sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities to promote more effective teaching of Spanish to Spanish speakers, and the services of Andrews Air Force Base which maintains a telephone language bank offering interpretation in 140 languages.

PRIVATE

Accommodation to language varieties is also increasingly available in the private sector as well. At least one major bank ATM now offers a 4 language choice before beginning a transaction (English, Spanish, French, and Chinese); instructions for using and assembling many products are now given in several languages; safety information is available in Spanish from the Gas company; greeting cards are available in several languages; and signage on businesses is often given in English and a second language (not always Spanish); a call to the utility company offers you first the choice of speaking to an employee in English or Spanish. There are church services offered in several languages (most frequently, Spanish and Korean) and there are 7 radio stations in the area in Spanish, three television stations in Spanish, and a range of local weekly newspapers in several languages. Interpretation services in over a hundred languages are offered

by the Language Line of American Telephone and Telegraph Company. As well, a private organization, Language Connections, provides “professional, culturally sensitive language services for organizations that work with or employ refugees or immigrants.”³¹

Over the years, many communities have attempted to maintain their mother tongue through what is often called Saturday schools. In these schools, children were given one or two hours of language lessons. The standards of these schools has never been closely monitored and most often the teachers were untrained volunteers. In the last couple of years, however, the

³¹ Brochure of Language Connections, Columbia, Maryland, 1-800-399-3476.

Center for Applied Linguistics and the National Foreign Language Center (NFLC) have begun studying this phenomenon and considering ways to (a) improve the teaching and (b) find ways to provide high school and college credit for this study. This has evolved into an annual conference on what is now being called Heritage Language Study. The first conference was published in Heritage Languages in America. Preserving a National Resource³². This new attention to the role of mother tongue may lead to increased language maintenance within Montgomery County but its impact is not yet felt.

Conclusion

In 1985, I did a review of Spanish Language Planning in the U.S.³³ At that time, the Spanish speaking community attempted to solve its communication needs mainly using the courts and existing laws to address these. Today, in Montgomery County, an urban suburb of Washington, D.C., it is the Executive Branch, which has been proactive in finding ways to include and accommodate the language differences which inhabitants display. The concern of the Executive Branch can be seen to be to find ways to provide better service, more information, and greater inclusion. Hence, public practice, at least in Montgomery County, has changed dramatically as the population has. This is not to say that private attitudes support all these activities. Indeed, there are certainly citizens who wish everyone would speak English and

³² Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 2001.

³³Rubin, Joan. 1985. Spanish Language Planning in the United States, Spanish Language Use and Public Life in the USA ed by L. Elias-Olivares, E. A. Leone, R. Cisneros, and J. Gutierrez. Mouton: Berlin

others who feel that those who are accommodated will never learn English. Fortunately, these narrow views of the complexities of serving and including an increasingly complex linguistic community are not that of the County Government which is pursuing a most enlightened policy.