

BACK TALK: The Language of Defiance, Denial, Distortion, and Development
Editorial Note by Lynda L. Hinkle

Imus's use of the power of the language to reduce successful young women to objects of racial epithet got him fired. In a South Philadelphia neighborhood, a cheesesteak restaurant owner becomes the subject of a national debate about whether the language of immigrants is valid and whether it should retain power in the United States, even the simple power to order a sandwich. Meanwhile, America as a whole asks the question on the world stage of whether the power of words is permitted to "enemy combatants", and even to Congress as they attempt to end the war in Iraq. President Bush uses the power of words in the form of signing statements, accompanying each veto of congressional legislation that he sends out. Internationally, the people of war-torn lands such as Darfur struggle to find a voice to ask for aid and the women of many countries cry out for protection against institutionalized rape. Speaking out has been an important concept in feminism from the beginning. Who owns language? Who can use its power? And how is that power used in a modern, technological, global world? How can it be harnessed for good? In this issue of MP Journal, we sought out papers that explore language and its power and how that relates to national and international issues.

As we circulated our call for papers, I began to think about what my own answer would be to these questions. The American answer to these questions would likely be very different from in other cultures where multiple languages are usually taught from an early age. Recently I've come face to face with how trapping it is to be mono-lingual because I have been working with the Rutgers University School of Law – Camden's Immigration Project. The project sends law students to the public library here in Camden, New Jersey to meet with immigrants or those with immigration questions and help them to figure out the complex system of immigration. Camden, whose population is 38% Hispanic, is full of Spanish speaking residents and, naturally, many of those who come to the immigration meetings are Spanish-only speakers. I watched with absolute admiration as a fellow classmate deftly spoke in Spanish, setting a family of new immigrants at ease. It was so frustrating for me not to be able to convey the information that I had to share because I was unable to speak the language and I wondered why, in a country with 40 million Hispanics and in which there are 28.1 million people speaking Spanish at home, why was I never taught Spanish in grade school? Why did I wait until college to try to stumble through a new language when my brain was already so hardwired? And why do so many people (many who would be unable to pass high school Spanish with a grade above a C) say that immigrants should be required to learn English when I, one of the most over-educated people around, can't manage to stumble through the Spanish alphabet let alone put words and sentences together despite two semesters of college Spanish?

Why are Americans so generally against learning other languages? Are we just lazy?

Or are we afraid that should we give up control of the language we may be asked to give up control over culture...and do we even have that now?

I realize that I sound like the Carrie Bradshaw of language, asking more questions in my writing than I am able to answer. The fact is, I do not have answers to these questions. I have only a few double dog dares:

I dare Americans to practice radical hospitality and learn the second most spoken language in our land, if not others. And if we adults can't do it, stop requiring it of other adults and start teaching it to the kids.

I dare Americans to stop assuming that those who are using dialects are uneducated or ignorant and allow strains of English to peacefully co-exist (for example, Ebonics).

I dare the Americans and the international community to start using language for peace instead of war...communication is a major tool for healing, or it can be.

And lastly, I dare you, readers, to examine how you use language in your life, in your work and in your communities. Are you hoarding or sharing the power of language? Who owns your language? And how can you inhabit it best for a better world?