

# Bassackwards: Construction Spanish and Other Signs of the Times

by Jay Nordlinger

America, of course, has always been a place of many languages, along with our common tongue, English. German, its cousin Yiddish, Chinese, Italian, Polish--they have all been spoken here, especially in homes and community centers. But Spanish in today's America is something else: a language ccoddled bowed to, enshrined.

We could talk about "bilingual education," which too often turns out to be monolingual education, and in the wrong tongue. We could talk about Spanish-language election ballots. We could talk about "For English, press 1. *Para espanol, oprima el dos.*" But let's talk, instead, about Construction Spanish.

Classes in--shall we call it "Con. Span."?--have sprouted up all over America. These are classes designed to teach contractors, supervisors, and other bosses in the construction business how to speak to their Hispanic workers. The bosses aren't learning Spanish, exactly; they will not be reading *Don Quixote*. This is a specialized language: *casco* for hard hat; *montacarga* for forklift; *pistola de clavos* for nail gun.

But wouldn't it be better, for all concerned, if the workers learned "hard hat," "forklift," and "nail gun"? We must put off such foolish questions, for the moment.

Construction Spanish is an example of what has been called "Survival Spanish," or "Command Spanish"--bits of Spanish acquired for a specific purpose. You can get trained in Restaurant Spanish, Fireman Spanish, or Health Care Spanish. And this last Spanish has sub-branches, such as Dental Spanish and Physical Therapy Spanish. Also, you can buy books and tapes that tell you how to converse with your gardener or maid, if that is your need.

But Construction Spanish has loomed especially large lately, for an obvious reason: the predominance of Hispanics in that field. Go into a Lowe's or Home Depot--stores that sell building materials--and you will see signs in Spanish (quite naturally). And you can buy any number of glossaries or handbooks. My favorite is *Spanish on the Job*, for its ad copy:

No previous knowledge of Spanish is necessary. All words are phonetically spelled out to assure correct pronunciation. Trust me, yelling in English isn't going to help.

Let me yell, just a little bit. The old deal was, you came to America and you assimilated into the culture. You presumably wanted to, otherwise you wouldn't have immigrated. You retained your mother tongue, of course, and you figured your children would know it, and you hoped your grandchildren would be interested (although that was no guarantee). But you were in America, and America included English. Hooray!

And what of now? Forgetting an immigrant mindset, what is the general American mindset? An article published in the *Washington Post* a few years ago shed some light. It concerned a Northern Virginia county, Fairfax, which had trained 450 of its employees in Spanish. A Fairfax official explained, "As we saw the changing demographics of the county, we said, 'How are we responding to the needs of new residents of the county?'" Not by encouraging their assimilation, that's for sure.

Hispanic immigrants had joined the sanitation department, so an assistant superintendent there took Spanish for Garbage Workers. (Really.) He said, "In our type of business, it's something we're gonna have to learn." It was not too long ago that immigrants thought English was something they had to learn. They did not expect their employers or supervisors to take Survival Polish or Survival Serbian; they saw to it that they acquired some Survival English.

The *Post's* reporter found one person, a middle-aged "supervisor on building projects in downtown Washington," who was not too happy about the new order. He acknowledged to the reporter that he wished his workers would simply learn English. But they were not--so he enrolled in Construction Spanish. "I'm not saying I like what's happening," he said. "But I figure I can't fight it."

Which is a near-perfect expression of cultural defeatism.

There is always a tug between the pragmatic and the idealistic, or the short term and the long term. You want assimilation and acculturation; but you also want to do business in the here and now, in whatever language. You want to be considerate of the immigrant, who has enough challenges, without a new language; but you are not pleased to see him trapped in a linguistic ghetto--barrio-ization, some people have called it.

I consider myself a veteran of the Spanish wars, although I participated in the most minor of ways. Years ago, I was working at a firm in Washington, D.C. We were told that, when we wanted boxes thrown away, we had to mark them "BASURA." *Basura* is the Spanish word for *trash*. And all of our janitors were Hispanic.

Everything in my traditional-American soul rebelled at writing "BASURA," thinking it a gross act of separatism, and probably an insult to the workers. "Why don't we write 'TRASH'?" I asked. "We're in America, and we don't want anyone walled off. We want them to join the American family. How will they ever rise in our society if they don't learn English? In Guatemala, we would write 'BASURA.' But here we write 'TRASH.'"

That didn't go over terribly well, and I made no headway. But I took to writing "BASURA/TRASH" on my boxes to be thrown out. That was my pathetic little stand: a word, a slash, and another word. But I liked it.

A while back, I wrote about this experience in a *National Review Online* column, and the subject provoked a ton of mail. I seemed to have touched some national nerve. Many Hispanics wrote of their frustration and resentment at having been shunted into Spanish-only classes, or "bilingual" classes that were the usual Spanish-preservation rackets. And a former manager of custodial crews in Phoenix wrote the following:

I once spent a few months trying to convince people in the corporate offices of a major insurance company that my employees didn't need orders in Spanish. They may have been willing to do menial labor, but that didn't mean that they were stupid, and it was condescending to think they couldn't learn a simple five-letter word in the English language.

Namely, "trash."

Another correspondent added a twist, saying, "Here in Chicago, the big offices distribute stickers to be placed on garbage items. They read, 'GARBAGE/BASURA/SMIECI,'" laying it out in English, Spanish, and Polish. Still another reader contributed this:

An acquaintance once told me that, years ago, when he was preparing for a job that involved supervising an office cleaning crew, the guy he was replacing suggested that he come in a half-hour early each day of the following week so he could learn enough Spanish to deal with the crew. The new guy replied: "I've got a better idea: Why don't you have them come in a half-hour early each day to learn enough English to deal with me?"

At that Washington firm, a young janitor and I became friends, and I learned that he had no dictionary: no English-Spanish, Spanish-English dictionary. I got him one. That night, he left me a note that contained one word: "Gracias." Mainly because of the misspelling, I'm sure, it was one of the most touching notes I had ever received.

A stirring protest against the ass-backwardness of contemporary American life.

Yet I am under no illusion that everyone who comes to America is dying to melt into the pot. Is aching to bear out the national motto, *E pluribus unum*. Years before I worked at the Washington firm, I worked at a public golf course in Michigan, and we had many leagues, one of which was "the Korean League." I was appalled at this, mortified for those good Americans of Korean origin who played every Wednesday afternoon.

So, brimming with idealism, I said to the leader of the group, "We should call it the Korean-American League or something else, right? Because you are fellow Americans, and it's not right to call it the Korean League." He looked at me blankly and said, "No, we're Koreans." Oh.

In any case, I tried--and so should all Americans, I dare say (native and immigrant alike). Of course, when you talk as I have, in this piece, someone always accuses you of being a jingo, boob, or xenophobe. People who can't find their way to the toilet in any European capital will paint you as a foe of languages. Will say that you're "afraid of the Other."

This even happened to S. I. Hayakawa, the famed linguist and politician. He was the fellow who founded U.S. English, the lobbying group. Hayakawa liked to say, "Bilingualism for the individual is fine, but not for a country." I imagine he spoke more languages than most people have toes. Yet that did not spare him the usual accusations.

I assure the reader that I like Spanish as much as the next guy--actually, considerably more. And Con. Span., Dental Span., and all the rest of the Spans. are hardly the worst threat we face. Moreover, I trust that Americanization will sometime kick in, for the masses of newly arrived Hispanics. But if it doesn't, we will lose a lot--all of us will.