

Opinion: Calif. losing its ability to speak Spanish

By Joe Mathews

How are Californians going to save Spanish?

Yes, I know that a call to preserve the Spanish language might seem ludicrous in a state whose very name comes from a Spanish romance novel. Nearly half of us are either from the Spanish-speaking world, or trace our heritage there; an estimated 38 percent of Californians speak Spanish.



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And, yes, my question about saving Spanish may seem daft now, as America's deranged politics pit Trumpian xenophobia, with its fear of being overrun by foreigners and their languages, against liberal triumphalism about growing diversity.

But the realities of immigration, education and language acquisition put the lie to the notion that Spanish has nowhere to go but up. To the contrary, there are clear signs that the Spanish language has already begun to decline. Which is why Californians should act now to preserve it.

Spanish is confronting the "Three Generation Death" law of non-English languages here. German, Italian, and Polish all but disappeared after three generations—a first, immigrant generation that learned some English, a second, U.S.-born

bilingual generation that lost its proficiency in the non-English language over time, and a third generation that grew up speaking English only.

It's possible that Spanish in 21st century California may prove to be a little more durable, given the geographic (and now digital) proximity of the Spanish-speaking world. But it's far more likely that Spanish will simply become the latest tombstone in the language graveyard that is America.

Census statistics and Pew Research Center analysis tell the tale. While nearly 80 percent of all people who identify as Hispanic (and are age 5 and older) spoke Spanish in the previous decade, that number is expected to fall to about two-thirds by 2020. While 25 percent of Hispanics spoke only English at home in 2010, that figure is estimated to reach 34 percent in 2020. This reflects the law of the three generations. While 53 percent of first-generation Latino arrivals to this country are Spanish-dominant and 40 percent bilingual, about 80 percent of third-generation Latinos are English-dominant, and 15 percent are bilingual.

Other trends also will hurt Spanish. Even before the U.S. elected a bigot threatening a border wall, immigration to the U.S. from Mexico was at net zero, and immigration from Latin America was in deep decline. That's unlikely to change, given growing middle-class prosperity, lower birth rates and higher education levels south of the border.

Another part of this story is the unrivaled and growing power of English as our planet's dominant tongue. It's become the language of global commerce, culture and technology. It's also wonderfully democratic, without the divisive gender distinctions of Romance languages, the tricky tones of Asian languages, or the complex grammatical constructions of German and Russian.

Californians should welcome the trend. Our more homegrown,

more English-speaking population should be more cohesive. But English's rise also poses important questions for California, because of our state's special interest in Spanish.

The reasons for preserving Spanish here go beyond the desire to honor the heritage of Californians of Spanish-speaking ancestry. Spanish is at the heart of the history of California. First, we were a Spanish colony. Then in 1849, our state was founded in Spanish (an official language of our first constitutional convention that year), with a constitution that required laws to be printed in both languages.

Preserving Spanish would serve the present and the future as well. There's money to be made if we can increase trade with the Spanish-speaking world. And it would be a huge step up for our education system to make Spanish a core requirement. Right now, you can graduate from a California high school without taking even one course in a foreign language. And the UC and Cal State systems require only two years of foreign language for admission. That borders on the criminally negligent, given all we know about the good that learning another language does for our brains.

In November, California voters approved Proposition 58, but that modest measure merely removed bureaucratic barriers to teaching California students in languages other than English. Spanish needs more, including state requirements and investment so that instruction is available to all.

If we preserve Spanish, we'll have a comparative advantage over the rest of the country, where the language doesn't have the same history and is more likely to die out. Spanish could become a special force in California, distinguishing us and binding us together.

With that happy thought, I wish you *Feliz Navidad y Prospero Año Nuevo*.

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