Monolingual media beat-up

By Ingrid Piller  |  July 4, 2012  |  Language learning, gender & identity

When US high schools make international headlines, it's usually because of a school shooting. But Orestimba High in Newman, a city of 10,000 in central California, is making the headlines for an entirely different reason: a 5-minute speech was delivered there in Spanish!

Sounds unbelievable that anyone would take notice of such a mundane event? Speeches in foreign languages are an everyday occurrence in schools around the world so why would this one make news?

At this year’s graduation ceremony on May 31, the valedictorian, a 17-year-old named Saul Tello Jr. delivered his speech in Spanish. In order to be the valedictorian, you have to be the smartest kid in your grade and Saul earned his spot out of 173 graduating students with a GPA of 4.2. Like more than three quarters of the students at Orestimba High, Saul is bilingual and speaks Spanish at home. His parents, who are first generation immigrants from Mexico, don’t speak English well and he wanted them to understand his speech, where he spoke about always striving to do your best, holding on to your dreams, and acknowledging those who came before you. I haven’t seen the full speech on the internet (my summary is based on an article in The Oakland Tribune) but it sounds like a beautiful speech (and actually not all that different from the valediction I delivered at my high school graduation more than a quarter century ago 😊)

Saul wrote his speech in English and Spanish and asked the principal’s permission to deliver the speech in both languages. The principal readily gave her permission but asked him to do the speech in Spanish only because it was a large graduation ceremony and there wasn’t enough time to deliver the valediction in two languages.

By all accounts the speech was well received and everyone was happy and proud of their achievements, as they should be – until ...

... until conservative political commentator Bill O’Reilly spoiled it for them by having a go at Saul and Orestimba High on his show, denouncing the speech as an example of “this whole self-esteem craziness” (whatever that may mean ...). The predictable result was a media beat-up where more and more media got in on the story and their
social networking sites quickly filled with comments mostly critical of Saul's language choice (e.g., here, herr and re or here) and decrying it as evidence that Hispanics don’t “respect the United States” or are “rude.”

Personally, I consider a media empire such as Foxnews and a media personality such as O’Reilly having a go at a teenage kid and his provincial high school morally equivalent to kicking a lame dog.

However, my personal moral judgement aside, what interests me about this story is that bilingualism and multiculturalism obviously work well at a local level but that locally uncontroversial practices are undermined by media and politicians demanding national conformity in the name of “maintaining standards.”

In the social networking comments I have read, people who self-identified as “local” were all voicing support for Saul’s choice, such as these two on Facebook:

*Our classmates knew his speech was going to be in Spanish and they didn’t complain so it wasn’t rude and it was a privilege he had gained for his hard work.*

*The media is making this a bigger deal than our Orestimba community. Not once did I hear of a student or parent complain about his speech.*

By all accounts the valediction in Spanish thus worked in its local context, similarly to the way in which multilingualism and multiculturalism work locally in the Vienna Central Library. However, as soon as linguistic and cultural diversity become a matter of abstract national debate – be it the media, politicians, or even researchers focusing only on macro-level issues – they come to be seen as a problem.

O’Reilly went on to use Saul's language choice as a launching pad for a discussion about falling educational standards in American schools. It was all fairly typical Republican union- and teacher-bashing but only very few of the comments I’ve read pointed out that Spanish was the language of choice not of someone who had no choice because they didn't speak English but of Orestimba High’s top student.

The connection between speaking Spanish and falling standards only works if you are wilfully ignoring the evidence. Similarly, the connection between multilingualism and lack of respect for the nation only works if you are wilfully ignoring the evidence.
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