

Editorial

by David Howard

I read the news today, oh boy.  
- John Lennon

Mexico City's most prestigious daily newspaper, Uno Más Uno, in its June 14 edition, published three articles related to language planning and bilingual-bicultural education. The unusual amount of attention devoted to these topics, although surely unprecedented, is probably coincidental - unless one subscribes to the theory that language conflict and crisis escalate in direct proportion to general political and economic malaise. In any case, the articles merit analysis.

The first one is about the festivities organized to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano de Relaciones Culturales (a repeat performance of a similar 40th anniversary bash held at the Instituto Anglo-Mexicano de Cultura a couple of months earlier); the other two articles demonstrate why historical circumstances call for anything but a celebration.

On page 6 of Uno Más Uno we learn that while Reagan is rallying support in Washington for the infamous Simpson-Mazzoli Bill, his insidious Doppelgänger John Gavin is doing his bit in San Diego. By declaring his firm opposition to bilingual education in the U.S., Gavin wins the applause of the lunatic fringe of the San Diego Chamber of Commerce (stronghold of John Birchers who normally tend to think of Reagan as a traitor lost to the International Communist Conspiracy).

Gavin, who shares with his mentor an abandoned career in Hollywood characterized by extreme mediocrity, and a subsequent

headlong plunge into irresponsible and ignorant meddling into the fate of the world's developing nations, seems to have trapped himself in a blatantly stupid contradiction. Even for him. Consider that if Gavin himself were not a Spanish-English bilingual, his only option to unemployment (other than more pro-alcoholism commercials for TV export to the Third World) would vanish. It is hard to believe that even Reagan could justify a government salary abroad for anyone this incompetent, were it not on the grounds that he spoke the language of the host country.

But Mr. Gavin is not talking about being against bilingual education for the ambassadorial class, or even for middle-class Mexicans in private schools. He is just against poor immigrant children. The proof? On page 15. The following day (!) he will speak in favor of bilingual-bicultural education at the IMNRC anniversary party!

No, Gavin's San Diego remarks are just the West Coast backup for Reagan's simultaneous lobbying efforts in Washington. He is not so much against foreign languages really as he is for repression, control and exploitation of immigrant labor and forced cultural assimilation. As Uno Más Uno's editorial (the very same day) states:

The Simpson-Mazzoli Bill, as is well-known, apart from the objectives it pursues to decrease or stop the flow of illegal immigrants to the U. S., must be viewed in the racist spirit that inspires its backers, especially those of the current Reagan administration.

It should also be pointed out that the bill is part of the overall Republican strategy of pressuring Mexico and other developing countries, especially in Latin America, to make their debt payments and natural resource export shipments on time and to rally around

Reagan's Central American war mongering and his crackpot conspiracy delusions: most importantly, the effort to destroy the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua and restore Somocista monsters to dictatorial power. Mr. Reagan believes that is the only way to keep the Red Army out of the malls and churches of vulnerable U.S. frontier outposts of democracy like Houston, Arizona and Beverly Hills.

Domestically, what Reagan and Gavin are after is cutting back funds for public school education and re-channeling them to the Pentagon. The idea is to put the pennies and the power back into the hands of local and state governments and thereby get obligatory prayer and Bible "creation theory" (as opposed to modern biology) back in the public schools and unwanted racial groups out of them. Less education, less civil rights, more mega-death weapons.

Unfortunately, with two or three notable exceptions, the Mexican press had virtually ignored these issues until they began to make headlines in New York, Washington and elsewhere. Meanwhile, a wonderful scapegoat had been found for both Mexican language policy failure and the inability to come to terms with the real U.S. intervention: The Summer Institute of Linguistics.

Story three: "A Bomb Explodes in SIL Headquarters in Tlalpan".

Whether or not this act of supreme political idiocy by a "Comando Revolucionario-Mexicano" is an indirect consequence of the intense anti-SIL campaign waged in the Mexican press in recent months is debatable. No doubt the bufoons allegedly responsible for the library and archives bombing, which fortunately left no casualties, had some kind of distorted informational input to fan their fanaticism and to arrive at the conclusion that this "enemigo internacional de los pueblos" left them no alternative ("no queda otro recurso") but "la violencia".

However, one must be extremely cautious in suggesting

a causal link between sensationalism in the press and terrorism in the streets. Naturally, no reporter, however mediocre and unscrupulous, suggested that the SIL library be attacked. And even if one had, it would not constitute complicity in the crime. Blaming writers for other people's actions is a type of reasoning used too often as an excuse to censor publications and imprison or even kill intellectuals. The risk of provocation from the exercise of free speech is one a government that believes in democracy is obliged to take - I would say, unconditionally. A journalist can violate the law by plagiarism and libel. Otherwise, he/she should be immune from prosecution and harassment.

The SIL witch-hunt has demonstrated that reporters' ignorance of the basics of Mexican law and history (not to speak of sociology and linguistics) is abysmal and deplorable. But it is not illegal. Even worse has been the opportunism and/or truly negligent ignorance of 'academic' spokespersons. The extent to which anthropologists and other social scientists will make fools and intellectual prostitutes of themselves to get their names in the paper or their faces on TV is indeed astonishing.

For those readers unaware of the systematic attacks against SIL in the Mexican press (which includes Proceso, Excelsior and Uno Más Uno, to name those publications I read regularly), the linguists are generally accused of CIA espionage, right-wing extremist ideology, support of genocide in Southeast Asia, the willful destruction of indigenous cultures, political and economic control of rural populations, and drug trafficking.

For these specific charges not a shred of hard evidence has been produced.

Space does not permit a full refutation of the charges or a critique of the reasoning used to attack SIL. I shall, however, make a few brief observations that reflect my own interpretation of this matter.

Personally, I find nothing as intellectually unpersuasive and spiritually banal as the standard doctrines of Protestant missionaries. But, in the first place, I am not at all convinced that SIL is either ideologically monolithic or, in general, nearly as reactionary as its critics would have us believe (on faith, incidentally). Second, I have my doubts that the alternatives are any less "evangelical," any less "foreign," at least from the point of view of the affected ethnic minorities.

It is not as though Church and state have not had equal opportunity to achieve their objectives to save the Noble Savage, although there is something to be said for the (seldom mentioned) argument that organizations like SIL can rest on their laurels and block young linguists with new ideas from getting official support for their projects.

Even assuming that SIL were as culturally imperialistic as its critics claim, it still seems a suspiciously easy and relatively innocuous victim. Assuming the Catholic Church, the federal government and the anthropologists (those whose idea of field work is a trip to Perisur; a safari, a weekend in Cuernavaca) could save the Indians from dangerous, foreign ideologies without inculcating any of their own, why are the really powerful and formidable agents of cultural and linguistic domination not attacked? Why do the same academic groups fail to clamor so fervently for the expulsion of the multinational corporations responsible for what transpires, say, during and between Televisa commercials for Benson & Hedges and Whisky (Hecho en México). If one presumes to decide what is culturally dangerous for the people, why not begin with the people who select what films and magazines are sold, what junk food is eaten, what reactionary nonsense is taught in foreign-dominated, usually religious, private schools in flagrant violation of the Constitution?

Are there not dozens of legal reasons for shutting down many private schools? Is Televisa too big an enemy to take on, while bullying SIL, especially when some high government officials

have given the green light, is easy? Does the scapegoating reflect the guilty conscience of those interest groups involved in bilingual education, an excuse for their notorious failures in rural Mexico?

It is important to distinguish the "kill a Commie for Christ" quasi-fascism of the hard-core fanatics among Reagan's 'moral majority' from the concern of serious scientists and theologians for peace and social and economic justice. The priests who are members of the Nicaraguan government are not the ideological equivalent of those who baptize the banks and beer factories in Monterrey; the Reverend Jesse Jackson is not the Reverend Jerry Fallwell. And there are important class, cultural and political differences among the wide range of Protestant groups. Recent studies by Mexican anthropologists are emphasizing this fact and criticizing the one-dimensional view of many previous researchers. SIL itself has, in fact, both Catholic and Mexican members.

Moreover, it turns out that SIL is more committed to Mexican development, more politically liberal and more disposed to work with government developmental agencies than many other professionals involved in linguistics and education.

Unlike many Mexican anthropologists, linguists and English teachers, SIL members tend not to celebrate conventions in Las Vegas and Paris; they accept poverty level salaries to spend years, and sometimes lifetimes, in tiny agricultural communities; they are not inclined to publish textbooks at exorbitant prices with foreign-based corporations; and their children do not generally attend Anáhuac University or the University of the Américas. While there is virtually no demand among social scientists for native Mexican language courses in Mexican universities (anthropologists are generally monolingual, and if they have studied languages at all they are English, French and German, in that order) - in contrast, SIL linguists learn to communicate in the Mexican languages spoken in the communities they work in. SIL was concerned about preserving these languages before bilingual-bicultural edu-

cation became fashionable in Mexico. If their brand of Christianity is foreign, it is certainly no more so than Marxism, psychoanalysis, structural anthropology, or Roman Catholicism. Their rhetoric sounds more like Martin Luther King in terms of racial and economic equality than Martin Luther or Billy Graham.

The founder of SIL, William Townsend, generally portrayed in the press as a combination Graham and Gordon Liddy, was in fact a highly respected humanitarian and an outstanding linguist. He also was a committed "Cardenista" and "indigenista."

For those who think SIL is anti-Mexican I suggest they read the testimonials (written decades later) of General Lázaro Cárdenas and the foremost social scientists of the Cárdenas era. I suggest they consider the respect shown by SIL for about 180 Mexican languages when many government and religious 'experts' were either apathetic or inclined to force-feeding Spanish - a la Gavin-Reagan. I suggest they contemplate the defense of the expropriation of the multinational (mostly U.S.) oil companies by Townsend when U.S. Republicans were calling Roosevelt a communist for tolerating it and when respectable liberal journals (Atlantic, for example) were advocating an ultimatum to Cárdenas and justifying taking the oil back by force. Finally, I suggest a first-hand reading of SIL linguists on economic and social development, which is anything but the "pie in the sky" or "happy Indian" ideology attributed to them.

I discovered all this while trying to establish the contrary. My research was prompted by some findings (worthy of further investigation) on connections between SIL's Kenneth Pike and U.S. ESL specialists like Fries, Marckwardt and Lado. I immediately suspected an important University of Michigan-State Department-Defense Department hook-up.

Although I never found the CIA myth to be plausible, I did imagine SIL members to be apolitical fundamentalists - all-American, if not CIA, robots.

References

Uno Más Uno; June 14, 1984:

1. "Es perjudicial el bilingüismo: asegura John Gavin". San Diego, UPI, p. 6.
2. "Estalló una bomba en el plantel del ILV de Tlalpan" by Héctor A. González, p.23.
3. "Hoy celebrará sus 40 años de vida el Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano de Relaciones Culturales" by Dorothea Hahn, p.15.
4. "El racismo de la Simpson-Mazzoli", p.11.