**Hispania Invited Column:**
America’s Language

**William P. Rivers**
Joint National Committee for Languages and the National Council for Languages and International Studies (JNCL-NCLIS)

*Hispania* 100.5 (2017): 13–15

*Hispania* Open Access files are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.
America’s Languages

William P. Rivers

Joint National Committee for Languages and the National Council for Languages and International Studies (JNCL-NCLIS)

The American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP) celebrates its one-hundredth year in 2017. This momentous occasion, and the well-deserved celebrations surrounding it, offers a propitious moment to consider what the next one hundred years will bring in language in the United States. At first glance, this seems a bit contrived, but as we will see, language and language policy are inextricably bound to the demographic, cultural, and economic forces which have shaped American society since before our founding, and which loom ever larger in the present day. In 1917, the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese was founded in a time of uncertainty, global conflict, mass migrations, and economic upheaval. Ironically, the nativism sparked by the Great War led to significant reductions in the teaching of languages in the United States, as well as an explicit link between “foreign” languages and anti-American sentiment. Combined with the relentless extirpation of the more than 500 pre-Columbian Native American languages and cultures in the preceding century (Macías 2014), and the appeal and construction of the mythos of a unified ethnolinguistic nation-state (Alba 1990; Sonntag and Cardinal 2015), the twentieth century in the United States became “the graveyard of languages” (Rumbaut 2009: 11). This is all too familiar to language educators, language and civil rights advocates, and policy researchers, and perhaps now so familiar that we draw a certain degree of grim reassurance from the parlous state of languages and language learning in the United States. We often say to ourselves “it has ever been thus,” and surely our advocacy for languages, and more importantly, our supremely and foundationally human acts of teaching, learning, and using other languages, set us apart. With apologies to Richard Brecht; much of this essay, and in particular the title, draws on years of conversations and debate, represented in his work for the Commission on Language Learning of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Brecht 2016).

However, this picture, while it may reflect the collective sense of the language teaching and scholarly professions in the United States, does not fully account for the reality of 2017. In comparison to 1917, we are reminded perhaps of Ecclesiastes (1:9), in that there is nothing new under the sun. The centennial year of AATSP also sees a world rent by conflict, economic displacement, and mass migrations. Yet one must bear in mind that, with respect to linguistic diversity, our own culture continues to change remarkably, albeit fitfully, and perhaps permanently. Starting in 2000, John Robinson and his colleagues began surveying American attitudes towards language policy issues (see Robinson, Rivers, and Brecht 2006a), correlating public perceptions of the position of English, the supposed threat of other languages and immigrant communities, and the desirability of language education, with a wide range of demographic factors. They extended this work to
examining the characteristics of speakers of languages other than English in the United States, whether first or heritage or second language speakers (Robinson, Rivers, and Brecht 2006b). In 2008 and again in 2012, these surveys were extended to pre-election polls, and included modules on attitudes towards a wide range of issues of diversity and tolerance (Rivers, Robinson, Brecht, and Harwood 2013; Robinson, Rivers, and Harwood 2011). Finally, the in-depth examination of the characteristics of those who claimed ability in another language was repeated (Robinson and Rivers 2012), and combined with an empirical assessment of the hiring practices of American companies, as they intersect with languages (Damari et al. 2016). As space and reader attention is limited here, these studies may be summarized as follows:

- Americans value languages. Roughly 70% indicate that languages are as important as math and science, that children should be fluent in another language before they leave school, that America’s languages do not threaten English (see the analyses presented in Robinson et al. 2006a; Robinson et al. 2011; Rivers et al. 2013).
- An increasingly high percentage of Americans equate tolerance of linguistic and ethnic diversity with tolerance of many other indicia of diversity, such as gay and interracial marriage, the legalization of marijuana, welcoming immigrants, and so forth (Rivers et al. 2013).
- Moreover, this tolerance has held steady since 2000, notwithstanding the intervening political tumult and changes to American foreign policy and homeland security (Robinson et al. 2011; Rivers et al. 2013).
- At the same time, roughly 20% of the population claims some ability to speak another language, although this varies according to the data source (e.g., the US Census or random stratified surveys). This proportion has remained steady for at least 15 years (Robinson et al. 2006b; Robinson and Rivers 2012).
- Finally, American companies seek speakers of other languages to meet the challenges of diverse clienteles, markets, and workforces (Damari et al. 2016).

In 2013, Richard D. Brecht and his colleagues coined the term “America’s Languages,” to capture the diversity and complexity of the languages spoken, taught, translated, and used in the United States (see Brecht et al. 2013). These languages encompass the Native American languages that predate European contact, the colonial languages of that contact (English first among them demographically in the present day, but also including Spanish in the American Southwest and French in Louisiana), the vast array of heritage languages spoken by immigrants and their descendants, of which Spanish is the largest in terms of the number of speakers but which include more than 350 languages from every corner of the world (United States Census 2015), all of the Anglophones learning another language, and all of the immigrants and their children learning English and maintaining their home languages. While perhaps imperfect as a label, the term itself carries a prospective connotation, one that in fact is the crux of this short encomium on the one-hundredth anniversary of AATSP, namely, that languages will continue to play an ever-increasing role in the public, economic, and civic life of the United States. Spanish and Portuguese, for a wide range of reasons demographic, economic, and cultural, will continue to occupy a central and vital place in America’s languages.

As language professionals, this should give us great hope for the future. A more tolerant, more diverse, more inclusive America, engaged economically, diplomatically, and culturally around the world and with the more than 25 countries where Spanish and Portuguese are first languages, will in the long run, be a place where our languages are ever more taught, learnt, studied, translated, and used.
WORKS CITED


