

# LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 26, No. 4 - Winter 1980

Editor of this issue: Jonas Zdanys

ISSN 0024-5089

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## REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF BILINGUALISM AND BICULTURALISM

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The purpose of this paper is to generate discussion on the problems of minority groups functioning within the framework of a larger society. General conclusions are arrived at by examining one particular group, the Latvians in Australia. The analyses throughout are based on personal observation.

### Description of a particular minority group

The Latvian group, though not large — one could expect every 500th inhabitant of Australia to be of Latvian extraction — is numerically concentrated in the larger urban centres. The population of Latvians is distributed evenly within the community: there are no ghettos, nor agglomerations of Latvian families within specific areas. Numerical concentration has been an important factor in providing financially viable amenities for culture maintenance.

The cultural and social life of the communities is housed in centres owned by the Latvian community and run by committees elected by the society. They provide facilities for the various activities of the community, such as schools, theatres, choirs, folk-dancing, literary activities, meetings, as well as socialising functions. Besides this, several separate organisations such as the returned soldiers' league, the Lutheran church, etc., have acquired real estate both within the city limits and in easily-accessible country areas. In the larger cities, viz. Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, social responsibility towards the aged has been undertaken.

There are privately-owned business concerns which are run for the benefit of the community and depend on it for their existence. These are the Latvian newspaper in Australia, the credit co-operatives and shops selling Latvian literature, arts and crafts, etc. However, private business enterprises which are owned by Latvians, but which are not specifically Latvian, do not rely on patronage by Latvians.

Material possessions are the visible and tangible evidence of a complex structure of a highly-organised group of people. However, underlying the superficial structure of the organisations is the will and motivation of the group to function.

### The prime concern of the group

The main concern of the community is to retain its identity or, in other words, to retard the forces of assimilation. One can restate Newton's first law of motion in sociological terms: "A minority group will remain in a state of placidity or uniform motion towards assimilation, unless it is acted on by some external force to change this state." It is obvious that the external force must be discovered in order to satisfy the self-perpetuating instinct of the minority group.

### Psychological considerations

There are several reasons for going against the tide of assimilation. A number of these operate on the individual in varying proportions at any given time. They may be classified as follows:

- (i) The culture of the majority group has not been accepted and still seems foreign to the individual.
- (ii) An acceptance of the status quo, where the minority group has always been present and its removal would entail major adjustments to the way of life of an individual.
- (iii) An extension of (ii); an esteem for the cultural enrichment made possible by the existence of the minority group.
- (iv) A sense of mission arising out of the notion that Latvian culture will disappear simultaneously with the complete assimilation of the minority group.

Lately, two other reasons have assumed greater importance:

- (v) Political influence can be exerted on Western powers as a constant reminder that the annexation of the Baltic States violates the principle of self-determination by a nation.
- (vi) Minority groups in the West see themselves as ambassadors for their people in the Soviet Union and sense that they have a moral duty to use the resources available in a free country to loosen the yoke of oppression of those living under a dictatorship.

## **Assets and debits**

An individual living in two cultures must reckon with the fact that both cultures demand his time. Much of his leisure time is consumed, therefore, by repeating tasks that are normally carried out only in the working time of his mono-cultural counterpart. On the other hand, self-improvement type activities (e.g., theatre, dancing, music, etc.) are more accessible to the individual and are guaranteed an audience when necessary. The minority group caters for a wide variety of cultural activities on an amateur basis, manifesting both the positive and negative aspects of amateurism. A definite advantage for the bicultural person is the "passport-to-the-world", which enables him to travel outside his place of residence with the knowledge that he will be welcomed as a visitor in a similar minority group as his own. Travel thus becomes more worthwhile and agreeable, as well as cheaper.

## **The role of language**

An important study of language and culture maintenance is that of Fishman (1966). He collected data on schools, the press, church groups and other organisations of minorities in America and from this evidence tried to evaluate to what extent language and culture maintenance is successful. Fishman found that the most important barrier to assimilation is language retention in a minority community. The disappearance of bilingualism is a sure sign that the assimilation is nearly completed and vice-versa: the community persists while there exists a core of speakers of the language. Thus new batches of immigrants, speaking only the mother tongue, are an influence on assimilation. Fishman found that assimilation was all but complete after the third generation following emigration. Schools were found to play a major role in language retention.

In Australia, schooling in Latvian can be obtained through regular classes on week-ends and backed up through participation in summer schools and seminars. Latvians can also avail themselves of the opportunity to send their children to the full-time Latvian school in Münster, Germany. However, the individual must make a conscious effort to provide himself with opportunities to practice and thus improve his language. It is dangerous for a minority group to accept low standards of speech from its members as this will inevitably lead to its dissolution. Sloppy and polluted language may be adequate to communicate on a very basic level. However, the most subtle and refined thoughts require sophisticated means of expression if they are to be accurately conveyed. Language must be cultivated in order to enable a person to express himself with precision and elegance. This is true for both languages in a bilingual situation. Each generation must be aware of the fact that it is the educator of its successor. Hence, if its language competence is low, that of the next generation will degenerate to the point where the language will be unrecognisable and an insufficient means of communication. A proper knowledge of its language is the due that one must pay the minority group in order to enjoy benefits offered by it.

## Bilingualism

Complete bilinguals, i.e., people having exactly equivalent facility in all spheres of two languages, are very rare indeed. It is difficult to maintain two languages at a level where an individual can use either with reasonable ease. Bilingualism has been studied in Canada by Lambert et al (1961). They found that motivation and intelligence are the two single most important factors in second language learning. Motivation depends, to a large extent, on the way in which an individual perceives the social group using the language he is trying to master. If the minority group is seen in a negative light, the learner is less likely to master the language than if the minority group is seen as an elite society in the total social framework.

Latvians in Australia are well regarded by the community in general, hence their social status need be no obstacle to language learning. However, the fact that they are acceptable to Australian society means that the path to assimilation is made easier: one does not like to struggle against kindness. In the book *Beyond the Melting Pot*, the authors put forward the theory that the reason certain communities, viz. the Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish, have remained separate entities in New York, is that the Americans did not want them to integrate, which gave them strong internal motivation to develop their own communities and cultivate their particular dialects. The opposite is true for the Latvian community in Australia.

## Language, culture and identity

An important reason for the lack of motivation to learn a second language stems from the fact that the minority group lacks a broader context to which to relate. The generation that was brought up in Latvia can appreciate her place, however modest, in the context of European history. The younger generation have not shared this experience. Poems about the beauty of Latvia describe a remote world which pales before the immediate surroundings.

It is important that young people experience the feeling of belonging to a culture that is rich in history and that continues to live. For this reason I strongly advocate that young Latvians should visit the country of their origin.

The older generation mistrusts the ability of people who have not had first-hand experience of communist atrocities to tell "right from wrong." It fears that communist propaganda will affect the thinking of young people, that they will espouse views contrary to its ideals. These fears are irrational and unfounded: propaganda is not inherently attractive and seems naive to people used to freedom of speech. Restrictions imposed by the communist government seems odious to people brought up in the belief that an individual has the right to act as his conscience dictates.

One of the important results of visiting Latvia is that a person has the opportunity to appreciate the extent of the injustice and the immorality of oppression that has beset that country. This realization — more than the sentimental memories of another generation and recounts of horror stories about inhumane acts perpetrated by the communists, true as these may be — is more likely to produce a sense of identity which in turn acts as the motivating force for young people to retain their language and culture.

## Concluding remarks

Australia is an isolated country and has the advantages and disadvantages of isolation. A major disadvantage for Latvians is the fact that constant contact with the home country is difficult. Frequent visits, however, are necessary in order to learn to cope with the emotional strain of these visits and secondly to be able to assess the mentality of people living in the Soviet Union. An understanding of the preoccupations of people living in the Soviet Union is important for two main reasons: firstly, so that the minority community is not thrown into chaotic confusion when confronted by visitors from the home country; secondly, so

that we learn to listen with sensitivity to our people under communist rule and glean from their words what our attitudes and course of action should be. In this way, our evaluation of offers for cultural exchange made by the authorities in Riga can be based on rational principles which are in keeping with the times and the needs of the minority group.

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