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Defining who is 'American' by the language they speak

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The American dream of Edilson Almeida took root under the glaring lights of a Dunkin' Donuts coffee shop in the tiny Pennsylvania town of Oaks.

There, week by week and word by word, he set aside the Portuguese of his native Brazil and learned to speak English. He did it by working one-on-one with a tutor from the Volunteer English Program, a suburban initiative to help adults learn the language and the culture. Knowing English enables Almeida to converse with employers — he cleans houses for a living — and to find additional work, to engage with neighbors, to more fully participate in society. "It helped me with my clients," he said, "and my whole life."

It has also helped Almeida, 44, navigate his way along the rim of a cultural volcano. Today, in the fierce national debate over immigration, language has become the intersection where demands for diversity and conformity collide.

Groups such as ProEnglish, a conservative, Washington-based nonprofit, insist on English as the official language of the land, the only one that should be permitted on government documents. Donald Trump has been outspoken as president and as a candidate, lecturing other GOP contenders, "This is a country where we speak English, not Spanish."

To some, new immigrants' lack of fluency shows an unwillingness to assimilate. Past generations of arrivals learned English, the argument goes, so why not them? But immigrant-rights groups say those assertions deliberately ignore the fact that Americans have always come in all colors, religions and ancestries — and speaking different languages.

"This idea that you need to only speak English is a furtherance of the white supremacist idea that default Americans are white, northern-European English speakers," said Sundrop Carter, executive director of the Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition, which supports immigrants and refugees.

The dispute can be particularly sensitive in Philadelphia, where population and business growth have long been fueled by immigrants who speak foreign tongues, and where nasty divisions erupted over a cheesesteak king who insisted his customers order in English.

The infamous red, white and blue sign at Geno's Steaks came down last year, a decade after its posting made then-owner Joey Vento a national celebrity.

The turmoil can seem ceaseless. Just last month in Cliffside Park, N.J., dozens of high-schoolers walked out of class to protest a teacher who told Spanish-speaking students to "speak American." She later apologized.

Outside the scrutiny of the news media, many businesses and agencies work hard to make sure people who don't speak English have the same access to programs and services as everyone else. This month, the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania Health Literacy Coalition convened what they hope will become an annual language summit, gathering interpreters, doctors and community leaders to discuss ways to ensure that patients and families have reliable translators at hand when interacting with care-providers.

CHOP employs 30 staff interpreters, offers services in 80 tongues, and sees 100,000 cases a year that require language assistance. Other hospitals are coming on board, despite the expense. Why? For one, dependable translation increases patient safety, which is good for everyone. It can help save money by avoiding unnecessary re-admissions and tests. And it's a lot cheaper than paying a big settlement if something goes wrong.

Discussed at the conference — as a warning example — was the huge payout that resulted from a Florida hospital case. In 1980, family members were pressed into service as translators for 18-year-old Cuban-American Willie Ramirez, whom they described as "intoxicado," meaning nauseous or poisoned, perhaps from a bad hamburger. Doctors treated Ramirez for a drug overdose — not for the bleeding in his brain that left him a quadriplegic. Depending on his lifespan, his settlement could reach $71 million.

"Money speaks, unfortunately," said Gabriela Jenicek, who manages language services at CHOP.

Beyond emergency-room doors, language directly impacts how people view one another, how they decide who belongs and who does not.

When the Pew Research Center explored what traits are vital for people to be considered "one of us" in the United States and elsewhere, it found that majorities in every country believed speaking the dominant language was "very important." By comparison, having been born in the country didn't much matter.

"It's so central to our identity — how other people see us comes from when we open our mouths," said Susan Mackey-Kallis, who teaches communication at Villanova University.
In the U.S., 21 percent of the population speak a language other than English at home, and 62 percent of those residents speak Spanish, Census figures show.

But the assertion that Spanish-speaking immigrants never learn, or don't want to learn, English is simply wrong, the libertarian Cato Institute found. Some may stick to Spanish longer than others, but English eventually becomes the primary language. Among second-generation Latin immigrant children, 91 percent said they speak English pretty well or very well, and among the third generation the figure was even higher, 97 percent, the Pew Hispanic Center found.

Almeida, who came here in 2002 and now is in the process of becoming a permanent resident, first tried to learn English on his own. Then he took classes at a community college, where it seemed every student was at a different level and few made progress.

He got by with basic words — *coffee* and *water* — and he felt society's judgment, such as when he took his car to a mechanic.

"He said, 'If you can't speak English, what are you doing here?' " Almeida recalled. "I never forgot that."

Nothing worked until he found Chester County's Volunteer English Program, or VEP, which matches trained tutors with students who may be immigrants or refugees. It's free. Clients aren't asked whether they are documented or undocumented, only if they want to learn.

The tutors meet students at public places close to their home or workplace, and at hours suitable to those who may be holding down two jobs to pay the bills. For Almeida, who lives in Chester County, Oaks, in Montgomery County, worked best.

Along with tutoring comes empathy and encouragement.

"I can't imagine, if I were dropped into Brazil and expected to speak Portuguese," said Donna Dello Buono, who started as a tutor and now is the program outreach coordinator.

Founded in 1986, the agency currently has 250 pairs of students and tutors and a waiting list of 150. Almeida, close to completing his second year in the program, has become a VEP evangelist, recruiting Brazilian friends who live in Chester County.

He and his wife labor 10 to 12 hours a day, and both are glad to do it, he said, because it enables their son to go to West Chester University.

"In this country, we can do that," he said. "This country changed my life. Every single day I ask God, 'Bless this country.' "