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EDITOR'S NOTE

**Hold My Tongue**

I was working on a story at a coffee shop in Mexico City one Saturday morning earlier this month, happy among millions of Spanish speakers, when my phone pinged with a headline:

*Trump signs executive order to make English the official language of the U.S.*

The given reason: national unity. (Or so the U.S. government claims.)

I am an academic bore who often gets lost down random rabbit holes. My first graduate degree was a British research master's in sociolinguistics and linguistic human rights. I focused it on post-colonial language policies in former British colonies, with a hyper-focus on Zambia, where I conducted two years of field investigations.

Zambia has 72 local languages — English not among them — and almost everyone in the country (98%) speaks one or more of these different languages at home. English is the home language of 2% of the population and is mostly spoken in Zambia's few urban centers.

Zambia's official national language: English.

The reason: national unity. (Or so the Zambian government claims.)

Language is access. When governments of multilingual countries impose official-language policies, they do so for control of wealth and resources, by hyping the language of the elite and disregarding the needs of the rest. We call this “linguistic imperialism.”

If you speak (and read) English in Zambia — meaning, if you're part of the upper classes — you have access to the country's media and newspapers, to your government's information (more or less), to secondary and higher education, and to social and health services.

If you don't speak English in Zambia but speak one of the seven major regional languages, you may get access to some social and health services, and some education, but not much more. If you don't speak English in Zambia, or any of the seven major languages, well, you know.

But going back to Mexico City and the ping on my phone that made me gasp so loud I had to apologize to my coffee-shop neighbors: The official reason was “national unity.” Other reasons? Division. Exclusion. Control. Ethnic discrimination. In other words, linguistic imperialism defined as the imposition of the language of the powerful on the linguistic practices of the less so.

I know many people on both sides of the aisle are already resisting, but if you're still wondering how to dissent on an even more personal level (that can also benefit your life), I suggest this: Study a different language, the language of your neighbors or of an ethnic minority. Then say this loud and proud:

“I am learning [SPANISH/NAVAJO/JAPANESE/TIWA/VIETNAMESE/ASL/OTHER LANGUAGE] to better understand my neighbors and to learn from them and their perspective(s). I am learning [LANGUAGE] to better support those among us who will be discriminated against by new English-language policies in our country.”

Let us also not forget that there are first and foremost hundreds of Native languages spoken in the U.S. Let us not forget that we, too, live in a country of immigrants. And let us not forget that linguistic exclusion does not unify.

For world-language and Native language resources and classes, start with the University of New Mexico, Santa Fe Community College, the Santa Fe Public Library, the Albuquerque Public Library, or Centro Cervantes, an Albuquerque institute dedicated to teaching Spanish. UNM has a Navajo-language program. And if you know of any others, email me.

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