

The 5-7-86 Reactor

Paul Azevedo



Language Key to History

Jordi Pujol, the president of Catalunya, visited Pacifica the other day, following in the footsteps of Don Gaspar de Portola, who was also a native of Catalunya, which is now a part of Spain. He mentioned something I had never thought of before. (Except for English speaking Sir Francis Drake repairing his ship at Drake's Bay), perhaps the first European language spoken in California (and especially in what is now Pacifica) was not Spanish but Catalan.

The language of Spain is Castilian Spanish. That is the official language of the nation. But within Spain there are other languages spoken that are at least as ancient and with at least as much claim to legitimacy as Spanish.

Besides Catalan (which in Catalan is called "Catala") there is Basque, a language I am told is so difficult that even a person with Basque ancestry can learn it only as a child. It has no known relationship with any other language, though several words have been found to be the same as some Japanese words, an interesting if puzzling

development.

Pujol mentioned that besides Portola, who was a native of Balaguer in Catalunya, Father Junipero Serra, who was born on the island of Majorca, also was a native speaker of Catalan.

The fact that Castilian rather than Catalan or Basque is the language of Spain is a historical accident. It has nothing to do with the inherent quality of the language and a lot to do with who conquered who, who was the dominant partner in mergers, and which language kings spoke centuries ago.

There are many languages which have been scorned and ridiculed over the centuries simply because they were the tongues of peoples whose lands were conquered or dominated by others. If you ask me about my own mother's ancestry, I say Italian. It is true that her parents came from a region, Piemonte, that is now part of Italy, yet when my great-grandfather was born Piemonte was part of the Kingdom of Savoy. The language spoken there, Piemontese is closer to French than to standard Italian. It is today treated as a dialect, yet it is as valid a national tongue as the Tuscan which became Standard Italian.

Language is one of the ways by which a people keeps its separate identity and distinctive character. Thoughtful people I have known, like an English teacher of mine named Mabel Ware, strongly recommend that children should learn both English and the native language of their parents. For a nation which has such a rich diversity of ethnic backgrounds, we have been awfully eager to get rid of what should be some of our proudest possessions, the languages that are the key to our own histories.