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### LEARNING "AMERICAN"

One of the inevitabilities encountered by just about any adult immigrant, e.g., a Dutchman coming to the United States, is that, from a linguistic point of view, that person will most likely always "stand out" and be an outsider in the "new" society, while the same may eventually happen to him also in the country in which he was born and raised. He may never go back to his native country (as was, of course, frequently the case in former times, but this is not true for most of today's immigrants, at least for those who freely left their homeland), but even then he will probably maintain some contact with relatives or friends "back home", in writing or via the telephone. Perhaps the problem I am referring to is not a terrible one, but I do believe that it has implications, mostly because language is something essential in everybody's life, as it is the principal "tool" we use in order to express ourselves and communicate with others. I am reminded of an incident that once happened to a Dutch acquaintance of mine who came to the U.S. some thirty-five years ago. His English is quite good, although it remains different from that of native speakers. Occasionally he returns to the Netherlands, and during one of these visits a relative said to him: "you know, your Dutch really sounds a bit funny." My friend replied: "Please don't say that, because in the States people tell me the same about my English." This may be a rather "funny" remark, but it is also a little sad, I think, that people who used to be fluent in one language (e.g., Dutch), have lost some or much of that fluency, which is a kind of intimacy, without ever becoming totally fluent in the other language (e.g., English) either. Even if one speaks the second language very well, it will almost never be quite the same as one's native language.

So far, I have referred to individual Dutch immigrants, but especially in the 19th and early 20th century they often came in groups and, thus, had a better opportunity to continue to speak Dutch. Yet, it is my distinct impression (and actually more than just an impression) that the "Dutch" spoken in these so-called Dutch communities quickly becomes a little "funny" also, because it remains stagnant and is no longer spoken in the most natural setting, namely the homeland. One of the most important facets of any natural, spoken language is that it constantly changes, sometimes rapidly, sometimes slowly, but it does change. Immigrants, even when they live together in a fairly large group, have lost the direct contact with the Netherlands and so it becomes impossible for them to be aware of the changes that constantly occur in the Dutch

language. They maintain a status quo, although their variety of Dutch is also subject to change of course, but more so under the influence of English. That's how we get to hear or read the various mixtures of Dutch and English that have been studied in detail by several scholars. One small illustration of a status quo is perhaps my own situation: I was married to an American who learned Dutch and spoke it exceptionally well. We often spoke it at home, yet it remained somewhat artificial in the sense that he couldn't "teach" me anything new in the Dutch language, precisely because it was not his native language.

With all of the above I have made it clear, I hope, that it is indeed possible and even relatively easy to lose one's native tongue, although never completely. Not too long ago I heard an interview with a young Dutchman who had recently immigrated to California. He made somewhat condescending remarks about other Dutchmen who had immigrated long before him, and believed that their difficulty in expressing themselves fluently in Dutch was in reality a "game" they were trying to play. I found the young man's comments rather naive and would like to hear him speak Dutch ten or twenty years from now. Language does need regular practice, it is not something innate that we'll always carry with us, and to become aware of that, one has to be a linguist or an immigrant.

Language is our principal means of communication, as I said already, but it is much more than a combination of sounds that carry meaning, much more than a particular "view of the world"; that is an attempt to create order in what would otherwise be chaos. This is a simplistic statement. It explains, for instance, why translations from one language to another are so difficult (certain concepts just don't exist in that other language). It also refers to what I, earlier in this presentation, called "intimacy" and explains why it's so difficult to feel truly at ease in another language (beware of those who claim to "know" several languages "fluently"). In this context, I should also mention that interesting psychological and sociological studies have been done about different forms of behavior found in one and the same person, according to the language spoken at a given time by that person.

One more comment about language being a "tool." Not only is it a tool used to communicate, but also to manipulate, and I don't mean that in a negative sense, but more in its meaning of "to influence, to have control over something or someone." Politicians and people in the advertising business are often seen as "manipulators," but that is certainly not where it stops. Linguistic manipulation takes place all the time and is used by just about everybody. For immigrants, however, this use of language is often more difficult and they may well

be at disadvantage and have a much harder time trying to get some "power" or "control."

I don't wish to exaggerate or invent problems, but I do hope that I have made it clear that language is something very pervasive, something that affects our lives much more profoundly than we often think, and that one's native language is something very precious that should not be taken for granted.