

Communicate to integrate

by Sabine Eiche

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Some months ago, at a branch of the Vancouver Public library, I couldn't get the computer to accept my card. I went to the librarian for help. She explained that they had recently installed a new interface with over fifty language options and consequently some things had changed. I asked why we needed fifty language options, English and French being the official languages of Canada. She responded that it was to make immigrants feel more integrated in the community. I couldn't follow the logic of that argument. Surely cocooning immigrants in their own – non-Canadian – language is more likely to segregate than integrate them, as far as the community as a whole is concerned?

For quite a while now, the favourite buzz words in town have been integration and diversity. We're supposed to promote, foster, and like the concepts – but so long as we don't speak a common language (English or French) and share more values and priorities, it will be difficult to achieve such utopian goals. Without compatibility, we'll be no more integrated than a vinaigrette of oil and vinegar – in other words, a diversity that's momentarily blended when shaken, but separated immediately afterwards.

Diversity, and the related words divers, diverse, divert, have had widely divergent meanings over the centuries. Their root is in the Latin verb “divertere,” meaning to turn in different directions, and, like so many words based on Latin, they entered the English language via Old French. In the 1200s, divers meant different in character or quality, a meaning that, in the 1700s, became associated with the word diverse. In the 1400s divers signified several, numerous, various, a meaning still current. But by 1581 it had acquired the meaning perverse, adverse – diversity was then considered a negative, evil quality. All that changed in the late 1700s, when diversity with regard to politics became a virtue of democratic nations. Our current use of diversity with specific reference to race and gender dates from the early 1990s.

Integrate and segregate sound like straightforward opposites but their etymologies reveal otherwise. Integrate, integral, integer, integrity and entire are all based on the Latin “integer,”

meaning whole or untouched, formed from the negative “in,” not, and the root of “tangere,” touch (same source as tangible, tangent). The significance of integrate, integration with particular reference to people can be traced to the first half of the 20th century.

Segregate derives, instead, from the Latin “segregatus,” past participle of “segregare,” to separate from the herd, the prefix “se” meaning apart from, and “grege,” ablative of “grex,” herd of animals. “Grex” also gave us congregate (from “congregare,” to herd together), aggregate (from “aggregare,” to bring together in a herd), gregarious (from the Latin “gregarius,” of the herd) and egregious (from the phrase “ex grege,” rising above the herd).

Diversity and tolerance are practically a Canadian motto – and yet we’re developing a rift in the population, due partly to a lack of communication. If Canada won’t fix this problem for us, why don’t we fix it ourselves? A first step would be for everyone to learn to speak one of Canada’s official languages. Communicate to integrate.