

AUDIENCE: What language issues are particularly poignant in today's political climate that they might talk about today?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, one issue that's critical is the right of people to have their lives, community affairs conducted in their own language. So for example, if some, say, dictator were to take over the United States and produce an edict saying the official language of the country is Swahili and that we all have to talk Swahili from now on and all official documents are in Swahili. And if you want to get a driver's license, you have to ask for it in Swahili and so on. I think we'd probably object, but that's the actual situation. For example, in Haiti, it's not Swahili. It's French. The language that the people speak is a different language, creole.

So that's kind of a problem that arises there. Similar problems arise here. We have Spanish-speaking communities. Do they have a right to conduct their lives, to have an elementary school teaching in the language that the children know and speak? Of course, they have to be assimilated into the general society.

But these are not incompatible goals. In fact, we know very well that a multilingual environment is actually stimulating. It doesn't impede. It improves performance and understanding, and being able to live in your own mind certainly has that effect, too. So when I grew up-- not me personally, but the communities that I was part of, the native language was Yiddish. And they spoke Yiddish, and that was fine. And when the kids went to school, they picked up English.