

‘Word For Word/Palabra por Palabra’ Book Launch

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Report by Scott Sherriff

Representatives from the British Council and Instituto Cervantes, the two most prominent organisations promoting the English and Spanish language respectively across the globe, addressed a Spring Gardens audience buzzing with anticipation to mark the launch of ‘Word for Word/Palabra por Polabra’, a book containing a series of essays and collected writings from twenty two experts in the language field. Having worked together on particular ventures before, Michael Carrier (Head of Global English Development at the British Council) spoke warmly of a natural synergy that had developed with the Instituto Cervantes and how working on a project of wider scope and larger scale was a logical next step in the relationship between the two establishments. Carrier, along with colleagues Martin Davidson (CEO British Council), Rafael Rodríguez-Ponga, (Secretary General, Instituto Cervantes), Rod Pryde (Director, British Council Spain), Francisco Moreno, (Academic Director, Instituto Cervantes) and María José Ferrari, (Spanish editor) provided a detailed account of how the process unfolded and the mission behind it.

The result of two years of endeavor, ‘Word for Word/Palabra por Palabra’ (offered in a bi-lingual edition) explores the political, social and economic factors which have contributed to the global pre-eminence of English and Spanish, (second and third respectively to Chinese in terms of numbers of speakers worldwide), and the extent to which they still exert an influence in trade and education. Indeed, English and Spanish form part of a rare group of languages that have transcended their countries of origin to additionally become the property of other regions of the world. Whilst ultimately dedicated to an analysis of the impact of English and Spanish on the modern world, the book’s reflections are broadened to also include musings on the situational challenges these languages face in light of an increasingly globalised economy.

The spirit of collaboration that transpired between the British Council and the Instituto Cervantes became one which sought to define how best to fulfill their roles as global authorities on language in relation to both those that teach and those that learn.

Collectively, the articles within 'Word for Word/Palabra por Palabra' posit the belief that the benefit derived from being able to communicate in another language is an essential component of preparing young people for life and augmenting their capabilities to make valuable contributions to their communities, locally and globally. The more languages you know, the book avers, the more of a person you are; a thesis that champions the manifestation of multilingual societies.

Though the shifting and changing patterns of global competitiveness are inexorable, there surfaces a potential to marry this with ways to develop language learning as a means of fostering cultural education. 'Word for Word/Palabra por Palabra', therefore, is framed by considerations pertaining to intercultural competence as much as language competence and prompts a debate of real importance, not just linguistically and educationally but also in the way in which countries will integrate in the future, the degree to which language itself will remain a tool by which to express one's individual identity, how languages' practical and symbolic identities may be reconfigured and how this will give rise to societies of cultural heterogeneity.

As the event drew to a close, Michael Carrier described how, although the British Council is focused on helping people around the world enhance their English language skills, it does not want to do this at the expense of English becoming a lingua franca that translates into negative dominance. Rather, as typified by the work carried out in 'Word for Word/Palabra por Palabra', the response must become one more focused on dealing with the challenges of an interconnected world and for those learning different languages to equip themselves accordingly. The footprint of the British Council's work is largely seen in classrooms through the work of teachers around the world, imbuing the organisation with a multi-

lingual sensibility that also recognises that the essence of engagement and involvement must be cultural as much as it is linguistic. Both the British Council and the Instituto Cervantes advocated a language policy that appreciates the need for different language skills as well as the intercultural skills to compete in a multi-cultural world.

A closing remark was that we cannot be linguistic and cultural imperialists. Maintaining dynamic intercultural exchanges around the world will act to dampen any English and Spanish pretensions to becoming a lingua franca. 'Word for Word/Palabra por Palabra' looks clearly set to spark much fruitful debate.