Analyzing the Rhetoric of the English Only Movement

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The destruction of cultures and the loss of land through past colonization is familiar history to many. Most U.S. schoolchildren have heard the stories of Columbus arriving in the Caribbean, about the waves of colonizers who followed to rape the land, and about the people and cultures they encountered. We still live in a world where colonization takes place, but through very different means. Today, dominant groups see the minds of unsuspecting voters as fertile soil for planting their political agendas (i.e., government-authorized statements, laws and practices concerning language use). Their goal now is not to colonize land, but to colonize minds through English-linguistic imperialism and xenophobic language policy, which establish English-linguistic hegemony, or through “the explicit and implicit values, beliefs, purposes, and activities . . . which contribute to the maintenance of English as a dominant language” in the United States (Phillipson 1992, 73).

In his book-length study of linguistic imperialism, Robert Phillipson (1992) explains that “the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages” (47). English Only (EO) and English Language Amendment (ELA) proponents employ discourses of fear to convince both Whites and minorities that multilingual U.S. citizens and immigrants, and their resistance to assimilation, are threats to the stability of the United States. Consequentially, English Only advocates are guilty of English-linguistic imperialism since they want young Americans, in general, to support the idea that English should legally and officially become the dominant language of the United States.

The elevation of English above other languages by the government reinforces cultural inequalities representative of English-linguistic imperialism. Linguist Joshua Fishman (1988) has speculated that an ELA represents a simplistic response to “middle class Anglo fears and anxieties . . . rather than any mature grappling with the really monumental economic, social and political causes of conflict” in U.S. society (132). Many literacy experts and linguistics scholars see ELA and English Only activists as modern agents of colonialism and linguistic imperialism who rhetorically plant seeds of fear into the minds of mainstream and minority voters alike. Language educators can combat English Only rhetoric by unmasking the deceptive language used by proponents.

In the past, colonizers were blatant in their assimilation of the land, language, and cultures of the people they conquered. A colonizing mentality continues to be prominent in the United States, but now it is masked as language policy which convinces both dominant and language-minority groups of the need to legislate an official language.

To combat this insidious attempt at colonizing American minds, educators should publicly proclaim and train others to examine how the rhetoric of the ELA and English Only movement is intentionally deceptive. This essay examines the literature and influence of U.S. English, the largest, most organized special interest group that promotes an ELA. By comparing both older and more recent U.S. English literature, I will show how this group has learned to mask its rhetoric to gain support across demographic lines. Its rhetoric convinces many people, regardless of ethnicity, to accept and support legislation which promotes linguicism and xenophobia, thereby devaluing ethnic cultural pride and identity. First, I explain how and why ELA advocates convince minorities and Whites to support them. In doing so, groups such as U.S. English can statistically claim that many Americans favor English-language legislation, regardless of their ethnicities. Second, I examine the rhetoric of U.S. English literature and documents found on its Web site. Next, by using U.S. House of Representatives and Senate bills, I demonstrate
how U.S. English has imposed its agenda of xenophobia on unsuspecting politicians and voters. Finally, I discuss the future implications and the repercussions that imposing an official language policy will have and already has had on U.S. citizens, thereby demonstrating how Official English rhetoric promotes discrimination.

Who Supports English Only and Why Do They?

At first glance, ELA legislation appears to have national support across demographic lines. Among the reasons that mainstream Americans support this legislation are star power, nativism, and status preservation. While minorities are often convinced by these reasons, they are also concerned about being deported and feel obligated to appear patriotic toward the United States. I examine these factors in turn and conclude by looking at how gender, income, and education also play a role in who supports official language policies.

Many Whites and minorities in America seem to be swayed, whether or not we admit it, by star power. Many people will support a cause just because a popular figure does. Sponsoring organizations such as U.S. English highlight in their literature and on their Web site that they are supported by celebrities such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Saul Bellow (U.S. English 1995b, 1). When ELA organizers ask for donations through biased pamphlets and misleading, statistic-filled bulk mailings, these successful stars have the extra money to make sizable contributions. According to James Crawford (1992), “U.S. English has spent upwards of $18 million since 1983 to promote English as the official language of the United States” (171). U.S. English is supported by solicited donations ranging from $15 to $250 per supporter. Meanwhile, scholars and educators have to face budget cuts and yearly calls by Republicans to shut down the U.S. Department of Education.

Minorities are also victims of star power. They too are convinced that if celebrities, especially minority ones, support a specific cause, they should as well. Minority attitudes are sometimes also influenced by the success of other people of color. It is no coincidence that U.S. English was founded by a person of color and has often been led by one. This sends a message that U.S. English must support people of color if “one of their own” runs it. For example, Linda Chavez was the executive director until 1988, when then-president John Tanton was unveiled as anti-immigrant and anti-Hispanic/Latino. Chilean immigrant Mauro Mujica is the current chair of U.S. English. When a person of power supports or promotes the EO movement, it is easy for ordinary citizens to accept these endorsements unquestioningly.

Nativism, or the favoring of “truly American” inhabitants over immigrants, also influences why Whites and minorities support English Only, but in a different way. Carol Schmid (1992) states, “Complaints about a breakdown in the process of assimilation seem to be especially prevalent during periods of high immigration, economic restructuring, and recession, providing fertile soil for the growth of nativism” (203). Members of ethnic groups who want to appear patriotic will demonstrate a nativist mentality, especially during key elections. A good example is the large number of people of color who voted in favor of the California citizens’ initiative Proposition 187, which prevents illegal immigrants from receiving most forms of state-funded social services, including free public education, welfare, and medical care except in emergencies. According to Matloff (1994), in California’s 1994 vote on Proposition 187, the rates of “yes” votes among African Americans, Asian Americans, and immigrants were near the overall statewide rate of 59 percent. Some legal immigrants support this kind of legislation because they feel they have an obligation to the country and its native inhabitants. This has led Schmid to note that, because they want to fit in, “immigrant groups are anxious to demonstrate their ‘Americanism’” by supporting the status quo (1992, 263).

In the Proposition 187 vote, this was true especially among Latinos, the largest language minority in the United States. Fishman (1988) explains that middle-class Hispanics “must reject the charge of anti-Americanism or they must confirm it, and the only way they can reject the charge in today’s climate of opinion is to vote for English Only far more frequently than do other Hispanics (29%)” (135). Over the past eighteen years, “Hispanics who were anxious to appear supportive of a popular majority
group proposition" were the most likely to support ELA and anti-affirmative action legislation, such as California's Proposition 209 or Washington's Proposition 200 (Zentella 172). Under the guise of tax savings and patriotism, many states have been passing initiatives such as these which do away with bilingual education, affirmative action programs, and social services such as welfare, health care, and food stamps. The nativist desire to be seen as different and better than more recent immigrants causes some people of color to support ultimately xenophobic legislation.

Both mainstream and ethnic groups are also convinced to support EO to preserve the socioeconomic status they have developed. "Status preservation involves declining groups seeking to maintain their eroding position by identifying with extremist causes" (Schmidt 1992, 203). Whites are most worried that their position of dominance is slipping to the growing numbers of second-language speakers in the United States. Nativism affects Whites' status preservation because they often mistakenly believe that immigrants do not want to adapt to U.S. life. One of the more widely distributed U.S. English pamphlets claims that groups fighting the ELA represent an "anti-assimilation movement," comprising "those who would like to turn language minorities into permanent power blocs" (Wright 1992, 128). In 1996 the U.S. Bureau of the Census found that the number of non-Hispanic/Hispanic Whites in the United States had dropped by about 10 percent since 1990, whereas Hispanics/Latinos in the same period grew by 10 percent, Blacks by 1 percent, and Asians and American Indians by less than 1 percent. "By 2000, the non-Hispanic White proportion of the population is projected to decrease to less than 72 percent with just under 13 percent Black; over 11 percent Hispanic origin; 4 percent Asian and Pacific Islander; and less than 1 percent American Indian" (Spencer and Hollmann 1998, 8). One way to prevent Whites from losing so much status that they become minorities themselves is to approve legislation such as an ELA that will keep more minorities from taking their place. People of color will also be prevented from intruding on the status of Whites if they are prevented from voting for like-minded candidates who want to see minorities get ahead in the United States. By passing an ELA, basic democratic rights such as voting are threatened if a person has limited Eng-

lish proficiency. Whites maintain their dominance in U.S. society if they are the only ones with the literacy levels necessary to cast a vote.

Some minorities, who are also worried about status preservation and want to maintain their hard-earned status, will turn against each other during voting seasons. In 1994 this was demonstrated in the Latino community of California when Proposition 187 was being debated. According to a Hispanic/Latino magazine poll, up to 84 percent of Hispanics/Latinos say there are already too many immigrants coming into the United States (Zagunis 1994). Some people of color are worried about losing their place in U.S. society to more recent immigrants, which makes them vote with the status quo.

Status preservation and nativism also come into play regarding bilingualism. The ideologies of those people who hold the power within a society readily influence the beliefs of those with little or none. Disempowered groups are comprised of people who very often just want to fit in, be accepted, or get ahead. In the United States, language minorities and immigrants are often disenfranchised. Those with power fuel the fears of the disempowered by bombarding them with rhetoric which suggests that if they maintain their native languages, cultures, and beliefs, they will not (and most definitely their children will not) "make it" in this country. Phillipson (1992) uses the term "apartheid inheritance" to describe Africans who believe that support for use of native languages is "intended to confine [their users] to an inferior position" in the colonized state (127). In the U.S. version of apartheid inheritance, many ethnic Americans mistakenly believe that achieving the American dream-myth implicitly requires them to support legislation that actually hurts them and requires them to give up their native language. Therefore, many of them follow the nativist idea of assimilation, which "[rejects] the contention that one [can] keep one's mother tongue, yet still be a good citizen of the United States. Learning English is [not] enough—committed immigrants [have] to cast off their alien tongues along with their alien status" (Lebowicz 1992, 105).

Besides race, gender, and income, education also affects who supports ELA legislation. Ana Celia Zentella conducted a study looking at these traits in polls and interviews conducted in 1986
and 1987 in New York City. When analyzing the data, Zentella found that in general women do not support the EO movement, noting that "there is some evidence that women are more sensitive to the social needs of language minorities" (1990, 171). Perhaps state-based ELAs have passed because female voices still lack equal representation in public arenas of power. This may be due in part to the fact that there are fewer women than men in positions such as judges, lawyers, politicians, and business leaders.

Education levels also seem to influence who supports an ELA. There is a myth in the United States that people who have more education are enlightened and concerned with civil rights and liberties. While this may have been true in the 1960s, in the current political and economic environment this is no longer the case. When it comes to education demographics, some people may be surprised to discover that Zentella's (1990) analysis of the data suggests that people who are highly educated and more financially secure are more likely to support the passage of an ELA regardless of their ethnicity:

The level of education of those interviewed did not turn out to play its expected role, if it is assumed that those with more education would be more aware of the socio-political underpinnings of the language policy issues and the damaging repercussions of an English-only amendment. Instead, those with the least education, elementary or below, were most against the amendment (71%), and those with the most education, graduate school, were most in favor of it (57%). . . . In general, as the subjects' educational level increased, so did their pro-ELA sentiments. (171)

On a similar note, income in conjunction with race also creates division lines in the distribution of EO votes. Carol Schmid's (1992) analysis of voting trends regarding state-based ELAs in Texas and California demonstrates these trends:

In California [in 1988], Hispanics with incomes below $10,000 were least likely to support Official English (19.9%), while those with incomes between $50-40,000 are most likely to do so (50.5%). By contrast, almost two in three Anglos support English as the sole official language; only California Anglos with incomes between $10-20,000 fall below the 50% mark. (204)

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Significantly, people of color who are extremely poor do not seem as worried about status preservation as Whites in the same income bracket. In Schmid's (1992) study, over 60 percent of Whites with incomes under $10,000 favored an ELA. Therefore, race and income must be considered in tandem when determining who supports an ELA.

These findings regarding gender, education, and income are important to anti-ELA activists because they indicate groups of people that anti-ELA supporters can target. Educating these groups alone may result in the votes required to keep another state-based ELA, or a national one for that matter, from passing. In the next section, I show how learning to analyze the rhetoric used by groups such as U.S. English will help U.S. voters understand how an ELA promotes linguisticism.

The Language and Literature of U.S. English

Because we live in a world that considers xenophobia irrational, modern colonialists such as members of U.S. English know they must mask their agenda in language that does not appear racist. In fact, the language they use has two purposes. First, the language of political correctness and diversity helps recruit support for their legislation from both in and outside ethnic communities. Ironically, politically correct rhetoric convinces some people of color to support racist agendas without realizing it. Second, EO groups use language that plays into mainstream fears of losing power and status in U.S. society to traditional minorities. As Phillipson (1992) points out, "Linguicism has taken over from racism as a more subtle way of hierarchizing social groups in the contemporary world" (241). In this section, I look at how U.S. English deliberately uses phrases and word choices which promote unfounded fear and xenophobia.

U.S. English uses polling as a propaganda tool to promote status preservation. Namely, it asks loaded questions to justify inequalities in access to government resources. In polls sent with donation requests, U.S. English asks questions such as, "Do you feel it is the U.S. taxpayer's obligation to pay for providing gov-
government services for everyone in the language of his choice?" Few Americans would answer "yes" to such a question simply because words like obligation and providing and the phrase "in the language of his choice" imply that some people are being forced to pay for services they do not use themselves. U.S. English uses these replies to create statistical percentages which suggest that 86 percent of Americans favor an ELA (U.S. English 1997, 2). Status preservation is often achieved through linguisticism, which uses language as "the means for effecting or maintaining an unequal allocation of power and resources" (Phillipson 1992, 55). The rhetorical practices of groups such as U.S. English, especially in regard to language policy and planning, are designed to promote linguisticism in the United States.

In the recent past, the fact sheets, pamphlets, and questionnaires distributed by U.S. English had an obviously anti-second-language-user and anti-immigrant tone. Memos, speeches, and internal correspondence released in 1986 demonstrated the bigotry of founder and one-time president of U.S. English, John Tanton, especially toward Latinos. Since then, U.S. English leadership has learned from past mistakes and toned down its language in an attempt to mask the message behind the dictum. U.S. English writers spin their tarnished image by appropriating politically correct terminology. As a result, U.S. English has rallied support in even ethnic and traditionally liberal communities for passage of English Only language policies, first at the state and now at the federal level.

Yet the 1995 U.S. English fact sheets clearly demonstrate the organization's xenophobic message. They discuss almost exclusively issues of immigration, private business/employment, multilingualism, and national unity, each a sore point in the current political climate. Comparisons between the way U.S. English discussed these issues in 1995 versus in its 1997-98 online fact sheets demonstrate that the group has moved away from the previous policy of using explicitly bigoted comments to using language which masks and perpetuates myths and stereotypes about immigrants and second-language users.

One major issue discussed in the 1995 fact sheets is immigration, legal and illegal. The 1995 U.S. English pamphlet asks, "What in the world is happening to our country?" (U.S. English 1995b, 2), referring to the "fact" that too many people coming to the United States do not attempt to assimilate to "our" culture, language, and religion. Repetition of the comment "that the American taxpayer is obligated to pay for translations, teachers and multi-lingual services for immigrants who don't want to make the effort to learn our language" plays on middle-class fears. In fact, the 1995 fact sheet repeats this message four times in a pamphlet that is only five pages long! Such statements perpetuate the myth that immigrants are lazy and a burden on society, thereby creating support from bigotry and tax-frustrated Americans.

Ironically, these sentiments also garner minority support for an ELA in two ways. First, these statements criticize anti-ELA supporters for "fighting to make America officially multi-lingual" (U.S. English 1995b, 2), creating the impression that second-language users want the world to view the United States as a multi-lingual society. This claim has no supporting evidence and belies the many studies which show that opponents of the ELA do not necessarily support any specific language policy for the United States. It also perpetuates the fear that too many services and benefits go to ethnic people but not to mainstream Americans, resulting in reverse discrimination. Because they do not want to be seen as drains on U.S. resources, many immigrants and second-language users support an ELA.

These statements also garner ELA support from minorities by shaming non-English-speakers into abandoning their native languages in order not to become the burden they are accused of being. Minority immigrants abandon multilingualism because they are convinced by U.S. English claims that multilingualism "holds back immigrants from becoming productive citizens" and "is one of the key factors responsible for the growing chaos, discmunity and disharmony festering in America today" (U.S. English 1995b). The original fact sheets went on to claim that "[i]his is bad for America, bad for our new citizens, and it's bad for you" (emphasis in original, U.S. English 1995b, 2). Since they do not want their native languages to hold them back, many minorities misguidedly support an ELA, naively believing that its passage will prove they want to succeed and fit in.

The problem with the U.S. English rhetoric highlighted above is that it assumes that all non-English-language-proficient users
are new citizens, not native-born ones. Especially noteworthy in U.S. English literature is the constant use of the word *our*, because it designates immigrants and the non-English-proficient as not "us" but "them," or "the other." This of course raises the question, to whom is U.S. English referring when it uses *our* and *you*? The 1995 U.S. English pamphlet states, "the American people overwhelmingly feel that when you come to live in America, you have an obligation to learn our language" (1995b). The implication is of course that the *our* (the Real Americans) are pitted against the *you* (immigrants, anti-assimilationists, American Indians, and multilingual people), regardless of citizenship status. Let us out of this picture are the millions of native-born Americans who may be monolingual in a language other than English. The use of the word *our* is plainly exclusionary.

Many native-born Americans grow up in bilingual families where English is not the primary language. My own grandmother, for example, was born in New Mexico Territory in 1903 and lived until 1996, never having learned a word of English. How was her inability to speak English "bad for you"? She raised two boys and two girls who not only spoke English but their native language as well. Of these children, two went on to serve in foreign wars such as the Korean War, one earning a Purple Heart. Clearly, my grandmother’s inability to speak English was irrelevant to her loyalty and duty to family and country. Americans so easily forget that only 150 years have passed since most of Spanish-speaking southwestern America was colonized as a spoil of the Mexican-American War, with little or no regard for the linguistic, cultural, and social rights of the people already living there. The same can also be said of modern day Puerto Rico.

In the past, the language of U.S. English fact sheets was especially and explicitly biased against recent immigrants, claiming that "[i]migrants don’t want to make the effort to learn our language." Yet, and quite ironically, this same pamphlet also claims that "English is the language of 97% of the people in this country" (U.S. English 1995b, 2). Does this mean that immigrants only make up 3 percent of the population? Why is U.S. English afraid of the power of so small a group? Linguistic studies show that by the third generation, immigrants have usually lost their native language ability because the first-generation im-

migrants are shamed into not passing their language on to their children. Realizing the inconsistency in its message, U.S. English plays down the anti-immigrant tone in the 1997 fact sheet, claiming, "the melting pot assimilates new influences and is strengthened by them." This new language use is intended to portray U.S. English as a welcoming and sympathetic organization that has the interests of immigrants in mind. An examination of the congressional bills that U.S. English has drafted and sponsored, however, clearly demonstrates that it in fact does not have the interests of language minorities in mind. If it did, it would not be pushing for the elimination of bilingual education; instead, it would promote legislation that provided more funds to the Department of Education for more classes in English as a second language.

Another issue that U.S. English obsesses over is language use in the business sector. In its 1995 literature, for example, U.S. English uses language implying that companies whose business is conducted in more than one language were directly responsible for the excesses in illegal immigration. This naturally placed those businesses in an unpatriotic light. When asked how an ELA would affect private business, U.S. English responded that, "While private business would not be legally required to operate in English, an alternate language would clearly communicate who the business is seeking to serve" (1995a). Clearly, this language carries "us versus them" subtext and was modified in the 1997 literature to say that an ELA "does not affect the languages spoken in private businesses" (U.S. English 1997, 2). This alteration demonstrates that U.S. English continues to learn that it must be subtle in its language use if it wants to recruit support from a broader audience.

Another piece of U.S. English literature takes a negative tone in discussing the benefits of being multilingual. This fact sheet is designed as a set of questions and answers, one of which asks: "Does official English imply that there is something wrong with multilingualism?" (U.S. English 1995a). While the answer is listed as "no," it is followed by: "However, it is both inefficient and expensive for the government to be required to function in multiple languages." This response claims not to devalue the ability of individuals to "function" in many languages, yet in the same
breath declares that for the government (which is made up of individuals) to do so is both inefficient and expensive. What could possibly be “right” about that? The way this question and answer are set up provides a clear message that those who are bilingual are a drain on the “rest of us.” U.S. English likes to put the onus of excessive government spending at the doorstep of immigrants. The 1997 U.S. English fact sheet says, “the designation of official English will eliminate the needless duplication of government services in multiple languages. Government operations will be simplified” (U.S. English 1997, 1). It even goes so far as to claim that “[m]oney formerly spent on multi-lingual services can instead provide immigrants with the assistance they need—classes to teach them English.” Doing away with multilingual services will not reduce the costs of funding English-proficiency classes. But what this comment fails to even address or acknowledge is that millions of native-born Americans are multilingual and use these services. Moreover, this strategy contradicts the received wisdom of teachers, scholars, and researchers of language use and civil liberties. The Linguistic Society of America, the National Council of Teachers of English, the Modern Language Association, and the College Composition and Communication’s Language Policy Committee have not only passed anti-ELA resolutions, but they advocate multilingualism for all U.S. citizens. Yet ELA proponents claim that monolingualism is best despite many findings to the contrary.

U.S. English has also succeeded in perpetuating the myth that the unity of the United States is at stake if an ELA is not passed. This myth permeates the language of the actual bills H.R. 123 and H.R. 1005. EO activists claim that without an official language, the American people will become divided along language lines, causing “severe damage to our nation’s unity” (U.S. English 1995b). They present this claim using fear tactics and logical fallacies that convince many uncritical people that racial problems in the United States come from being multilingual. Much of the research in applied linguistics, language planning, and literacy shows that this argument is spurious at best (Phillipson 1992, 230). David F. Marshall and Roseann Duenas Gonzalez (1990), for instance, note that “attempts to force language homogeneity for reasons of national unity are doomed to be coun-
terproductive, and will inevitably cause only increased disunity” (45). Among many other scholars, Kellman (1971) has shown that “the development or establishment of a common language . . . may well create inequities and meet with resistances and may hamper, rather than enhance, . . . unity” (37).

U.S. English’s 1995 fact sheet is so bent on promoting this false unity that it writes that those fighting the ELA “are doing severe damage to the unity of our nation” six times in the four-page document (1995a). This is not a topic that U.S. English is willing to abandon. In fact, the 1997 fact sheet says that because of government-sponsored multilingual services, “immigrants fail to learn English and separate into linguistic enclaves. This division of the United States into separate language groups contributes to racial and ethnic conflicts.” This paragraph further claims that “[d]esignating English as the official language will halt this harmful process,” another fallacious statement. Study after study has found that “rather than preserving feelings of community, . . . the English Only movement is more likely to breed disharmony and intergroup tension” than solve or prevent it (Schmid 1992, 209).

While it is nice for U.S. English (1995b) to claim or wish that “a shared language is the common bond that promotes the understanding of racial and cultural differences,” the fact remains that this is nothing more than an unrealistic dream. Where is the proof to contradict all of the academic studies to the contrary? African Americans and Euro-Americans, for example, have been speaking varieties of English in the United States for centuries, and how unified are they? Robert Phillipson (1992) makes this point best: “National unity is not something that any language can guarantee, just as proclaiming a single official language cannot wish away a multilingual reality” (283).

ELA legislation is no more than a Band-Aid applied to already existing ethnic tensions in an unequal society that likes to think it has made many strides, when it has not. Racial tensions in the United States will not go away by mandating legislation that makes the use of only one language acceptable and legally binding. All such legislation does is fan the flames of intolerance and lend legitimacy to the racist cries of “Speak English, this is America!” and “Go back where you came from.” EO and ELA
legislation only promotes greater polarization and increased interethnic hostility, just the opposite of what Official English advocates and H.R. 123 and H.R. 1005 claim are their primary goals.

Because U.S. English members helped draft the original version of H.R. 123, it is important to examine how pieces of this legislation may have convinced the public and politicians that no harm could come from its passage into law. The language of this and other proposed laws presents hegemonic arguments, which Antonio Gramsci once defined as dominant ideas “which can be presented plausibly as being in the interests of the whole people, of the nation” (qtd. in Phillipson 1992, 74). The next section of this essay examines only a few paragraphs of H.R. 123 and H.R. 1005 to demonstrate the appropriation of the language of inclusion to exclude multilingual citizens from public services in the United States.  

English as the Official Language of the United States

In 1995, U.S. English helped sponsor the introduction of House Bill 123, which if passed would declare English the official language of the United States. Less than one year later, in August of 1996, H.R. 123, now named the English Language Empowerment Act, was passed in the House. Since most Americans do speak English, and because the name of the bill makes it sound positive, it should come as no surprise that the House voted in its favor. But a close examination of the ideas, wording, and organization of H.R. 123 demonstrates that it not only does not empower anyone, but in its new form, H.R. 1005, this bill also violates the constitutional rights of U.S. citizens who speak English as a second language.

Since members of U.S. English helped write both H.R. 123 and H.R. 1005, they easily managed to include in them the unity agenda. As a result, both bills repeat almost verbatim the 1995 U.S. English fact sheets’ fallacious wording and rally of unity, which is no more logical now than it was then. Section 101, finding number 4 of the bill states, “in order to preserve unity in diversity and to prevent division along linguistic lines, the United States should maintain a language common to all people” (H.R. 123, §101,[4]).

According to section 2, number 6 of the H.R. 123, “the purpose of this Act is to help immigrants better assimilate and take full advantage of economic and occupational opportunities in the United States.” The bill contains no suggestions (or provision) for how assimilation will lead to jobs. This statement also assumes that immigrants are not assimilating on their own, and that mandating English-language use will help immigrants assimilate. Nothing in the bill, however, indicates how the act will help immigrants assimilate, unless forcing them to lose their native language is what is meant by helping or assimilation.

In 1995 U.S. English claimed that “foreign language instruction [would not] be affected in any way. . . . The purpose of bilingual education, that of teaching non-English proficient (NEP) children English, will be strengthened” (U.S. English 1995b, 2). H.R. 123 took up the U.S. English position to “support the use of effective, transitional bilingual education programs that quickly move LEP students into the mainstream.” Both the 1997 U.S. English fact sheet and H.R. 123 claim that “any monetary savings derived from the enactment of this title should be used for the teaching of the English language to non-English speaking immigrants.” Finding number eight, section two, of H.R. 123 also claims that “the use of a single common language . . . will promote efficiency and fairness to all people.” But again, isn’t it fallacious to claim that this act will broaden immigrants’ economic and occupational opportunities, given that H.R. 1005 eliminates both the bilingual voters act (the Voting Rights Act of 1965) and bilingual education programs?

H.R. 123 is careful to note that it is not intended in any way “to discriminate against or restrict the rights of any individual in the [United States].” If this is true, why does H.R. 123 only “preserv[e] use of Native Alaskan or Native American Languages (as defined in the Native American Languages Act)?” Why does the more current bill, H.R. 1005, repeal the Bilingual Education Act, call for the termination of the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs in the U.S. Department of Education, and repeal the Voting Rights Act of 1965? Isn’t this discrimination? Why is one family of non-English languages
protected and not the rest? Since H.R. 123 and 1005 also repeal the Voting Rights Act, citizens whose English proficiency is limited are denied the right of democratic participation. How can these bills not be discriminatory toward non-English-speakers when they repeal the most basic, fundamental right of people belonging to a democracy, the right to vote?

Unity, integration, prevention of discrimination, and equal opportunity are the key phrases repeated in both U.S. English literature and the bills it has sponsored and helped draft. Given the bill’s language, the House may have approved H.R. 123 in order to be part of the politically correct bandwagon. But this democratic talk is a cover for an anti-immigration, xenophobic, linguistically imperialistic agenda. Ana Celia Zentella’s (1990) study found that “[t]hose who [are] given the opportunity to consider the possible repercussions of official English amendments for education, voting rights, and public safety . . . are more likely to reject the ELA if they understand its negative implications” (167). It is our duty as citizens to inform ourselves, colleagues, friends, and legislators of the discrimination that results from passing this kind of bill. If voters had understood what their representatives were really voting on, they might have urged them not to support H.R. 123 or H.R. 1005. But the U.S. House of Representatives passed the English Language Empowerment Act on August 1, 1996, by a vote of 259–169.

Implications and Conclusions

Over six years ago, in the essay “Who Supports Official English, and Why?” Zentella (1990) made much the same case I have in this chapter—that it is up to teachers, scholars, parents, and voters to combat racist language-planning policies. She wrote, “The tactics, techniques, and wording of the proposed laws, and the associated campaign thrusts, must be analyzed and understood . . . . The challenge is fivefold: To clarify the wording, explain the repercussions, calm the fearful, uncover the hidden agenda, and unmask the bigots” (177). Unfortunately, her call to action has been largely ignored, as evidenced by the fact that when Zentella wrote those words only eighteen states had Official English laws; as of 1998, that number has grown to twenty-three. When a modified version of H.R. 123 was sent up to the U.S. Senate (as S.R. 323) in February 1997, it was never voted on. If S.R. 323 and the newly revised H.R. 1005 pass, the entire country has only a presidential veto to prevent legislated discrimination from returning to the United States Constitution. S.R. 323 now has 110 cosponsors. While it is not expected to pass in the Senate, and President Clinton has promised to veto it if it does, this may be yet another empty promise, given the president’s record for flip-flopping on politically charged issues.

A major problem with the Official English movement is that it is not led or informed by anyone trained in language planning, applied linguistics, cognitive psychology, TESOL, bilingual education or ESL, rhetoric, social science, or literacy/language theory. Too often politicians and the general public cast their votes and make decisions and legislation on issues they know nothing about. In January 1997, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) reintroduced the English Plus Resolution, first introduced in 1995, back into the first session of the 105th Congress, and a similar resolution was passed in May 1998. The latter is the only legislative counter to measures such as the bills discussed above. Among its many claims, the House resolution “recognize[s] the importance of multilingualism to vital American interests and individual rights, and oppose[s] English Only measures and other restrictionist language measures” (M.Con.Res. 4, 1997). Ever since the Makerere Report was released in 1961, linguists have known that English is not best taught monolingually; that the ideal teacher of English is not a native speaker; that the more and earlier English is taught does not always produce better results; and that if other languages are used in instruction, standards of English will not drop (Phillipson 1992, 185). It is time to get these facts out to the general public.

A February 1997 issue of The Council Chronicle updates the NCTE membership on the fight in the U.S. Supreme Court on the constitutionality of the ELA passed in Arizona. Specifically, passage of any ELA contradicts the 1923 Supreme Court case Meyer v. Nebraska, which ruled, “The protection of the Constitution extends to all to those who speak other languages as well as to those born with English on the tongue.” In the Chronicle
article, Geneva Smitherman, chair of the Language Policy Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, says the interest in such legislation "in this country that touts itself as the seat of democracy" (qtd. in Coombs 1997, 3) is ironic at best. During her presentation at the 1996 NCTE Annual Convention, Smitherman noted that fear is partly behind the official English movement—fear among the White majority who are seeing their numbers decline while Latino, African American, American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander populations grow. . . . [T]he economic environment in the U.S., in which unemployment hits even the most highly trained, well-educated workers, has created a "fear that limited resources will make it impossible for everyone to have a slice of the American dream pie." (qtd. in Coombs 1997, 3)

In this environment, people of color become easy scapegoats, Smitherman says, "especially when their language marks them as 'the other.'" Although Latinos are often the target of these unsubstantiated fears, it is not only the linguistic traditions of Spanish speakers that are threatened by Official English. This point needs to be made clear to the voting public. ELA legislation is written so that no languages other than English will be supported, funded, or promoted by any sector of the U.S. government.

In one of its original pamphlets, U.S. English claimed, "When enough citizens stand together and speak out together on an issue, the politicians listen." We need to be like U.S. English supporters who contact their elected officials to sway their votes. We need to sign petitions and create sound bites that inform the public at large of the implications of a national ELA. We need to convince the public that English is not now, nor has it ever been, threatened by multilingualism. We need to promote the economic, social, and professional benefits of being a speaker of many languages. We need to be those citizens who let our politicians, colleagues, friends, family, students, and parents know that U.S. educators will neither support this legislation nor reelect those who do.

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**Note**

1. Linguicism is defined by Phillipson (1992) as "ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, efface, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined as the basis of language" (47).

**Works Cited**


IV

OFFICIAL ENGLISH, OFFICIAL LANGUAGE, AND THE WORLD

It has been a tradition in the literature on language policy to include comparison and analysis of the language policies of other multilingual communities in the world. Examples have been deployed on both sides; proponents of Official English cite examples of national division and ethnic conflict to argue that without a strong single language gluing them together, nations, as a rule, fall apart. Opponents of Official English also cite examples of how centralized and oppressive language policies, rather than multilingualism, cause division. To continue this tradition, we have included three essays that approach English Only from an international perspective. Each of these essays, however, is unique in that it does not simply follow the pattern of using examples from other countries.

Robert B. Kaplan and Richard B. Baldauf Jr. provide an excellent update on Official English legislation in the United States, and also present a host of valuable reasons why these policies, if adopted at the federal level, are likely to cause problems. They view languages as complex ecological systems that interact with their social environment in complex ways. Language use, just like living organisms, is hard to regulate or standardize. English is a language of many varieties that are spoken in the United States and all over the world. Some of these varieties respond to changes in English spoken in the United States; some of them do not. In addition, the United States is already a multilingual culture comprised of eclectic cities like Los Angeles, where more than one hundred communities of different languages coexist. To enforce any kind of standard or official English in the United States and in those parts of the world where U.S. English is already regarded as “standard” would take more than a presiden-