But empirical, calm arguments don’t engage the real issue: language is a symbol, an icon. Nobody who favors a constitutional ban against flag burning will ever be persuaded by the argument that the flag is, after all, just a “piece of cloth.” A draft card in the 1960s, was never merely a piece of paper. Neither is a marriage license.

Language, as one linguist has said, is “not primarily a means of communication but a means of communion.” Romanticism exalted language, made it mystical, sublime—a bond of national identity. At the same time, Romanticism created a monster: it made of language a means for destroying a country.

America has that unique otherness of which I spoke. In spite of all our racial divisions and economic unfairness, we have the frontier tradition, respect for the individual, and opportunity; we have our love affair with the automobile; we have in our history a civil war that freed the slaves and was fought with valor; and we have spoons, hot dogs, hamburgers, and milk shakes—things big and small, noble and petty, important and trifling. “We are Americans; we are different.”

If I’m wrong, then the great American experiment will fail—not because of language but because it no longer means anything to be an American; because we have forfeited that “willfulness of the heart” that F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote was America; because we are no longer joined by Lincoln’s “mystic chords of memory.”

We are not even close to the danger point. I suggest that we relax and luxuriate in our linguistic richness and our traditional tolerance of language differences. Language does not threaten American unity. Benign neglect is a good policy for any country when it comes to language, and it’s a good policy for America.

Responding to Reading
1. According to King, what are the dangers of trying to maintain a bilingual society? What examples does he present to support his position? Does he offer enough examples?
2. What countries does King mention to support his argument that a multilingual society can maintain its unity? In what ways are these countries like the United States? In what ways are they different? Is King’s argument convincing?
3. King says, “America may be threatened by immigration… But America is not threatened by language” (35). Later, he says that “the great American experiment will fail—not because of language but because it no longer means anything to be an American.” (40). How do you think Jorge Amselle (p. 253) would respond to these statements?

5 Nineteenth-century American writer. [546]

Jorge Amselle

Jorge Amselle (1969– ) was born in Washington, D.C., to Nicaraguan immigrant parents. He spoke little English when he first started school, but he learned the language as part of his cultural assimilation. In 1992, he received a degree in economics from the University of Maryland and began to work for a variety of research organizations in the Washington area. Since 1994, he has been communications director for the Center for Equal Opportunity, an organization that lobbies against affirmative action programs. His writing has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Times, the National Review, and the Weekly Standard, among other periodicals. In the following essay, which appeared in the National Review, Amselle argues that most Hispanic parents are opposed to extensive bilingual education and want their children to learn English as quickly as possible.

As the new school year gets under way, over one million Hispanic children are beginning their classroom experience in the United States in Spanish rather than English. For nearly thirty years professional Hispanic activists and bilingual-education proponents have been telling us that this is what Hispanic parents want, and that it is in the best interests of Hispanic children.

But every poll conducted of language-minority parents has shown that what they want for their children is English. The Center for Equal Opportunity recently commissioned a national survey of six hundred Hispanic parents—the first of its kind in more than eight years. This survey found that more than 80 per cent of Hispanic parents want their children taught in English and not in Spanish. And 63 per cent want their children to be taught English as quickly as possible—whereas bilingual-education theory calls for children to be taught academic content courses in their native language for five to seven years.

While the education establishment is resisting the deconstruction of bilingual education, some progress is being made. In response to parents’ protests, New York City is ending the automatic testing of children with Spanish names for placement in bilingual programs. The main problem with this approach was that students were being misidentified as needing bilingual education when their problem was that they had not been taught to read in any language. Hispanic children who scored below the 40th percentile in a standardized English exam, which by definition is 40 per cent of all the students taking the test, were automatically placed in Spanish-language programs, even if they did not speak Spanish.

In Los Angeles, over 100 Latino parents picketed their local school for almost two weeks to protest the lack of English instruction. These
parents had a legal right to request all-English instruction for their children, but their rights were nullified by the hurdles placed before them by school administrators.

The boycott ended only when the school promised to provide classes in English. The school also promised to halt the practice of requiring parents to attend parent-teacher conferences before allowing children out of the bilingual program. Parent-teacher conferences are often used to bully, intimidate, and shame parents into leaving their children in bilingual programs they know don’t work.

Indeed, bilingual education is working so poorly in California that the State Board of Education is backing off from forcing school districts to use native-language instruction. The California Teachers Association has also joined the stampede away from bilingual education. Its newsletter states that the emphasis on using children’s native language has “crippled the Spanish-speaking child’s educational development.”

Despite the mounting evidence, there are researchers and organizations, like Virginia Collier of George Mason University and the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE), that continue to praise this failed educational technique. Professor Collier’s study is often cited as proof that bilingual education works. However, her study has yet to be completed, let alone subjected to peer review.

In a monograph published by the New Jersey Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages-Bilingual Education (NJTESL-BE), Professor Collier shares some of her less publicized insights. “We must encourage language-minority parents to speak the first language at home, not to speak English. The worse advice [teachers] can give parents is to speak only English at home,” she writes. She even suggests that teaching children only in English is child abuse. She writes: “To deny a child the only means of communicating with his parents or to denigrate an adolescent for expressing her emotions through first language is tantamount to physical violence toward that student.”

NABE readily admits that bilingual education is failing at least some students, calling these cases “abhorrent aberrations.” However, NABE ignores the fact that the few bilingual-education programs that work do so only because they are more English-intensive than what NABE advocates.

In fact, the vast majority of the research in favor of bilingual education is desperately flawed. Professor Christine Rossell of Boston University has conducted an extensive review of over 300 bilingual-education studies. She found that only 60 measured reading ability in a methodologically acceptable way; of these, 78 percent found bilingual education to be no better or actually worse than doing nothing. For math scores, 91 percent of the 34 scientifically valid studies showed bilingual education to be no better than doing nothing.

In spite of this evidence, Latino parents who oppose bilingual education often find themselves fighting a lonely battle. In fact, in both Los Angeles and New York City anti-bilingual-education parents’ groups are being assisted by the religious organizations, not by traditional Hispanic advocacy groups. The reason is that traditional Hispanic organizations long ago sold out the interests of Latino parents to the bilingual education establishment. Now, whenever parents complain about a system that fails to teach their children English, their representatives not only ignore their pleas for help, but actually oppose them.

Some Members of Congress as well as many state legislators are seeking far-reaching reform of bilingual education. Unfortunately, because Congress ignored an opportunity to reform federal bilingual-education policy as part of the Official English legislation passed recently by the House, Hispanic children and parents will have to suffer through another year of bilingual education.

### Responding to Reading

1. Amselle begins his essay by saying that there is a split between “what Hispanic parents want” and what “professional Hispanic activists and bilingual-education proponents” want (1). What evidence does he present to support this statement? Should he have offered more evidence? A different kind of evidence?

2. If, as Amselle contends, there is mounting evidence that bilingual education programs do not work, why does the federal government still require schools to use this method of teaching? Do you find his explanation plausible?

3. In “Should English Be the Law?” (p. 242), Robert D. King refutes a number of familiar arguments against bilingual education. Which of Amselle’s points does King address? How convincing are these rebuttals?

### Widening the Focus

- Jonathan Kozol, “Savage Inequalities” (p. 100)
- Bharati Mukherjee, “American Dreamer” (p. 445)
8. When people speak, they usually send class signals; that is, the higher their social class, the more correctly they speak. Write an essay in which you compare the class signals sent by characters in two TV sitcoms.

8. In “Sexism in English: A 1990s Update” Alleen Pace Nilsen says, “The feminist movement has caused the differences between the sexes to be downplayed” in language (17). Is this true of advertising? Find advertisements in several newspapers and magazines, and analyze their use of language, particularly their use of gender-specific words. Then, write an essay in which you agree or disagree with Pace’s contention. If you wish, you may also refer to “Sex, Lies, and Advertising” by Gloria Steinem (p. 000).

9. Recently, there has been a great deal of debate about the benefits and drawbacks of a multilingual society. Supporters say that a multilingual society allows people to preserve their own cultures and thus fosters pride. Detractors say that a multilingual society reinforces differences and ultimately tears a country apart. What do you see as the benefits and drawbacks of a multilingual society? As a country, what would we gain if we encouraged multilingualism? What would we lose? Use any of the essays in this chapter to support your position.