ENGLISH: OUR OFFICIAL LANGUAGE?

Edited by BEE GALLEGOS

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Cover: The growing immigrant population of many U.S. cities has prompted newsstand owners to increase the number of foreign-language publications they sell.

Photo: AP/Wide World Photos

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target of English-only lobbying groups, who fear it is a device for minority language maintenance rather than for an orderly transition to English. Troubling to teachers as well is the fact that bilingual programs are often poorly defined, underfunded, and inadequately staffed, while parents and students frequently regard bilingual as a euphemism for remedial. In its defense, we can say that second language education did not come into its own in this country until after World War II. Bilingual education, along with other programs designed to teach English as a second language, are really the first attempts by American schools in more than two centuries to deal directly with the problem of non-English-speaking children. They represent the first attempts to revise language education in an effort to keep children in school; to keep them from repeating the depressing and wasteful pattern of failure experienced by earlier generations of immigrants and non-anglophone natives; to get them to respect rather than revile both English, frequently perceived as the language of oppression, and their native tongue, all too often rejected as the language of poverty and failure.

Despite resistance to bilingual education and problems with its implementation, the theory behind it remains sound. Children who learn reading, arithmetic, and other subjects in their native language while they are being taught English will not be as likely to fall behind their anglophone peers, and will have little difficulty transferring their subject-matter knowledge to English, as their English proficiency increases. On the other hand, when nonanglophone children or those with very limited English are immersed in English-only classrooms and left to sink or swim, as they were for generations, they will continue to fail at unacceptable rates.

*English is Here to Stay*

Those Americans who fear that unless English is made the official language of the United States by means of federal and state constitutional amendments they are about to be swamped by new waves of non-English-speakers should realize that even without restrictive legislation, minority languages in the US have always been marginal. Research shows that Hispanics, who now constitute the nation's largest minority-language group, are adopting English in the second and third generation in the same way that speakers of German, Italian, Yiddish, Russian, Polish, Chinese or Japanese have done in the past. However, as the experience of Hispanics in southern California suggests, simply acquiring English is not bringing the educational and economic successes promised by the melting-pot myth. Linguistic assimilation may simply not be enough to overcome more deep-seated prejudices against Hispanics.

Nonetheless, there are many minority-language speakers in the US, and with continued immigration they will continue to make their presence felt. The 1980 Census showed that one in seven Americans speaks a language other than English, or lives with someone who does. Even if the courts do not strike down English-only laws, it would be difficult to legislate minority languages out of existence because we simply have no mechanisms in this country to carry out language policy of any kind (schools, which are under local and state control, have been remarkably erratic in the area of language education). On the other hand, even in the absence of restrictive language legislation, American society enforces its own irresistible pressure to keep the United States an English-speaking nation. The Census also reports that 97 percent of Americans identify themselves as speaking English well or very well. English may not be official, but it is definitely here to stay.

If the past cycles of protective legislation for English are any indication, whatever happens in the present debate over the English Language Amendment to the US Constitution and in similar debates at the state level is likely to be minimally disruptive and only temporary. The issue of minority languages will not soon go away, and a constitutional amendment cannot force people to adopt English if they are unwilling or unable to do so. Nor will English cease to function as the nation's official language even if it does not have a constitutional amendment to establish it. . . .

who spoke in other tongues as "the babblers." Ancient Slavs called the Germans across their border "the mute" or "unspeaking" people. Today, U.S. residents whose primary language is other than English—especially Spanish speakers—are being regarded as "un-American."

A pitched battle is underway between those who consider that, for the sake of America's cohesion, English must be legislated the official language through state or federal constitutional amendments, and those who consider such attempts bigoted or xenophobic. The main goals of the English-only movement are to eliminate or limit bilingual education in the public schools; to prevent state or local governments from spending funds for translating road signs or government documents or for translators to assist non-English-speaking patients at public hospitals; and to abolish multilingual ballots—required in 375 jurisdictions by the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Florida, Colorado and Arizona—states with large Hispanic populations—voted in referendums last year to make English the official language, bringing the number of states with such laws to 17.

In contrast, New Mexico's legislature voted down an English-only law, and endorsed "English Plus" stating, "Proficiency on the part of our citizens in more than one language is to the economic and cultural benefit of our State and the Nation."

But what does "English only" mean? That question is being raised in California, where voters approved a language law. This year [1989], a legislative committee rejected a bill that would have banned the use of languages other than English by state and local government agencies. Also, a state senate committee, responding to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, enacted a law prohibiting private companies from restricting their employees' use of non-English languages while at work, unless necessary for business reasons. In 1988 the Los Angeles federal appeals court, countering some companies' English-only rules, said such restrictions are not only a veiled form of discrimination but a way of increasing racism.

The groups that have led the fight "to protect English by declaring it the official language of the United States" are U.S. English (whose co-founder, S. I. Hayakawa, is a former U.S. senator from California and a retired professor of linguistics) and English First, part of the Committee to Protect the Family. These groups are on the offensive, claiming that they are trying to help non-English speakers get ahead economically and socially. U.S.
He got married to his high school sweetheart in 1928—a Pole who had emigrated with her parents when she was 13 years old—and the two spoke English at home, she with a slight accent. With their parents they spoke Polish. Their children, the grandchildren of the immigrant Pomykalski, spoke English at home and at school, and used Polish only when speaking to Grandmother in the kitchen. In each domain of language—school, social life, work, church and family—the use of Polish diminished.

The original Pomykalski's great-granddaughter was born in 1956 in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio. She grew up speaking no Polish and has very little connection to her Polish heritage. She is thoroughly enculturated in American ways and language. As Wilson says, "Wistfully, this generation hopes to recover some linguistic access to a culture that now... they wish they knew better."

Some immigrants have defied assimilation. Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn speak Yiddish, and some Amish in the Midwest speak a German dialect; they have chosen to live on linguistic islands. Finnish and Scandinavian immigrants in rural communities in the northern Midwest did not quickly assimilate for geographical reasons. But the commercial and societal forces shaping Hispanic immigration over the past 35 years suggest a different scenario for these immigrants.

Social and economic constraints have cut off many Hispanics from mainstream American—that is, Anglo—culture. Hispanic women who work only in the home have had limited contact with U.S. culture, and language programs sponsored by local governments or businesses rarely reach them. Furthermore, in many of the largest U.S. cities one finds Spanish-language radio, TV and newspapers, and videocassettes, billboards and even grocery and department store labels in Spanish—not to promote Spanish but simply to sell goods. English-only legislation would not change these realities.

But despite the social and commercial forces leading Hispanics away from assimilation, recent studies have concluded that first- and second-generation Hispanics have learned English as fast as Italians, Russians, Greeks, Romanians or Japanese immigrants did at the turn of the century. An editorialist in the Wall Street Journal reports that an analysis of 1980 census data by professors at the Urban Institute and the University of Chicago reveals that while a great majority of Hispanics over the age of 25 speak Spanish at home, most also speak English with proficiency.

And a study by the RAND corporation reveals that language-assimilation statistics for Hispanic immigrants are in line with the history of the Polish family discussed above. Nearly half the permanent Mexican immigrants living in California speak English well, and only about 25 percent speak Spanish exclusively. For the most part, their American-born children are bilingual and 90 percent are proficient in English. Over half of their grandchildren speak only English. David Lopez, a professor at UCLA, concludes that if immigration from Latin America dried up today (not likely to happen), language assimilation by Hispanics would be complete by the year 2030. Leonard Dinnerstein and David M. Reimers in Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration and Assimilation believe that "with so much more public assistance available than had been given to immigrants in previous generations, it is possible that the newcomers may not need as long a time to move into the mainstream of American society."

The issue that most divides the English-only advocates and their opponents is bilingual education. Former President Reagan spoke against it. Congress has debated it. Newspaper op-ed pages and radio talk shows have discussed it. "Bilingual education" is really a misnomer, since the goal of such programs is not to produce bilingual students, but to make Hispanic, Chinese or Vietnamese students proficient in English while drawing on their own native language as a transitional tool. U.S. English and other groups claim that bilingual education helps perpetuate adherence to non-English tongues. But the National Association for Bilingual Education points to research revealing the advantages of bilingual education: when students participate for an average of two to three years researchers notice "improved academic achievement test scores, reduced rates of school dropout and student absenteeism, increased community involvement in education, and enhanced student self-esteem."

Many older people who emigrated to the U.S. when they were in grade school were thrown into English-only classrooms and made to swim or sink. They claim that all their immigrant peers learned to swim, and quickly. However, no studies were done at the time to determine how many immigrant children sank—dropping out of school or never living up to their potential. Language acquisition can be a slow arduous process for many. And there is more to education than learning a language. Learning math, science, music or art in one's native language gives a student skills readily transferable to the English-speaking world. A
student does not need to relearn the subjects taught in Spanish when later reviewing them in English.

Though the U.S. has never had an official policy of introducing English to immigrants, language assimilation has always been startlingly rapid. Kenji Hakuta in Mirror of Language: The Debate on Bilingualism credits economic interests and "benign neglect" of one's own language as the leading causes of immigrants' forsaking their mother tongues. Another reason cited is that educational psychologists urged immigrant parents to avoid speaking a non-English language at home on the false premise that bilingualism stunts the academic growth of children. While no linguists tout this theory today, many proponents of the English-only movement still believe that there is room for but one language in a young person's mind.

When immigrants poured into America in the 19th century one of three scenarios could have played out. American culture could have transformed the immigrants (Americanization of assimilation); the culture could have been transformed by the immigrants (melting pot); or the culture could have split into separate groups. For over 150 years the pattern has been one of assimilation, "a move," Dinnerstein and Reiners write, "into the mainstream of American life [requiring] the relinquishment of cherished cultural ties." Immigrants start in separate groups—as Hispanics do today by attending Spanish language churches and marrying other Hispanics—but within four generations they assimilate, no longer calling themselves, for example, Polish-Americans but simply Americans.

Political unity, communication and transportation systems and financial factors will keep the U.S. an English-speaking nation. English does not need to be legislated the official language; gender forces than those proposed by English-only proponents will produce that end. As the U.S. enters the '90s, a new awareness of other cultures' music, language, customs, food, electronic goods and even political ways is transforming our life. There is a growing realization that Americans of northern European descent have much to learn from U.S. residents of Latin American or Asian backgrounds. Perhaps in the 21st century the strict assimilation patterns of the past will yield to more "melting"—the mixing of cultures in a way that changes the flavor of the entire society.

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1 Some employers impose restrictions against the use of a language other than English in their workplaces. Reasons given for the restrictions include: "The use of a foreign language in a workplace is inappropriate; English has been made the official language of their state and safety and public relations require that only English be spoken.

Can employers lawfully regulate language in the workplace? It is largely an unsettled issue. There are only a few court decisions on the matter. Guidelines issued by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) indicate that prohibiting employees from speaking a language other than English amounts to national origin bias under the Civil Rights Act. However, the guidelines permit language restrictions if they constitute a "business necessity." It should be noted that EEOC guidelines do not have the force of law but courts look to them for direction.

A case that followed EEOC guidelines held that a California meat-packing company's requirement that employees speak only English on the plant floor violated the Civil Rights Act. Up to 60 percent of the company's employees spoke Spanish and English fluency was not required for hiring. But management issued an English-only requirement, maintaining the rule was necessary to avoid friction among employees, improve plant safety and increase productivity. The EEOC found that the company discriminated on the basis of national origin and retaliated against Spanish-speaking employees by establishing the rule.

A federal district court agreed with the EEOC, saying that there were less restrictive alternatives available to increase employee productivity and discipline. The court observed that a 1986 amendment to the California constitution declaring that English is the state's official language may have raised "employer consciousness" to the English-only rules and "emboldened them, improperly, to take those risks." It also observed that the state legislature did not pass any law to enforce the constitutional amendment. (Garcia v. Spun Steak Co., DC. N. Calif., N. C91-1949RHS)

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