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Monolingual and Proud of It*

'If you live in America, you need to speak English.' According to a Los Angeles Times Poll (1998a), that was how three out of four voters explained their support for Proposition 227, the ballot initiative that dismantled most bilingual education programs in California. Many Arizonans cited the same reason for passing a similar measure last year (Proposition 203, 2000).

Ambiguous as it is, this rationale offers some clues about the way Americans think about language. No doubt, for some English-only enthusiasts, the statement has a patriotic subtext: one flag, one language. Rejecting bilingual education was a way to 'send a message' that, in the United States, English and *only* English is appropriate for use in the public square.

Other voters merely seemed intent on restating the obvious. English is so dominant in this country that non-English speakers are at a huge disadvantage. Thus schools must not fail to teach English to children from minority language backgrounds. Students' life chances will depend to a large extent on the level of English literacy skills they achieve.

Immigrants have generally understood these truths more keenly than anyone, and have behaved accordingly. As the linguist Einar Haugen (1972) once observed, 'America's profusion of tongues has made her a modern Babel, but a Babel in reverse.' By their third generation in the United States, newcomers have typically adopted English as their usual language and abandoned their mother tongue.

There is no reason to think the historic pattern has changed. Although the number of minority language speakers has grown dramatically in recent years, owing primarily to a liberalization of immigration laws in 1965, so too has their rate of acculturation. Census figures confirm the paradox. While a language other than English is now spoken at home by nearly one in five US residents, bilingualism is also on the rise. A century ago, the proportion of non-English speakers was 4.5 times as large as it is today, and in certain states the disparity was considerably larger (see Table 1). As the US population becomes increasingly diverse, linguistic assimilation seems to be progressing rapidly by historical standards.

The political problem is that the average American has trouble believing

*Editorial column for *The Guardian* (UK), March 8, 2001.

Table 1 Percentage of non-English-speaking persons,* 1890 and 1990

	<i>1890 (%)</i>	<i>1990 (%)</i>	<i>Ratio 1890 : 1990</i>
US population	3.6	0.8	4.5 : 1
New Mexico	65.1	0.9	71 : 1
Arizona	28.2	1.1	26 : 1
North Dakota	11.8	0.01	878 : 1
Wisconsin	11.4	0.1	103 : 1
Minnesota	10.3	0.1	86 : 1
Louisiana	8.4	0.1	70 : 1
California	8.3	2.9	3 : 1
Texas	5.9	1.5	4 : 1
New Hampshire	5.7	0.08	72 : 1
Colorado	5.4	0.3	22 : 1
Michigan	5.2	0.1	52 : 1
Nebraska	4.9	0.06	83 : 1
Illinois	4.7	0.7	7 : 1
New York	4.6	1.3	4 : 1

Source: Census Office (1897); 1990 Census of population

*Age 10 and older in 1890; age 5 and older in 1990.

all this. One Right-wing organization has raised millions of dollars with a direct-mail pitch that claims:

Tragically, many immigrants these days refuse to learn English! They never become productive members of society. They remain stuck in a linguistic and economic ghetto, many living off welfare and costing working Americans millions of tax dollars every year. (English First, 1986)

Such perceptions are hardly uncommon. Perhaps this is because Americans who came of age before the 1970s had little experience of linguistic diversity. Growing up in a period of tight immigration quotas, they seldom encountered anyone speaking a language other than English except foreign tourists, who were usually white and European.

So today, when Spanish and Vietnamese are heard routinely in public

and when bilingual government services in Tagalog and Gujarati are not unknown, some Americans conclude that the hegemony of English is threatened, and perhaps their 'way of life' as well. Suddenly, they are tempted to support coercive measures, as proposed by the US English lobby, to 'defend our common language.'

An English-only movement based on these premises came to prominence in the 1980s. Thus far it has succeeded in legislating English as the official language of 23 states,¹ although such declarations have been primarily symbolic, with few legal effects thus far.

The campaign's ideological effects have been more significant. In particular, English-only agitation has made bilingual schooling a lightning rod for political attacks from those concerned about immigration policy, cultural change, and the expansion of minority rights. Debating the best way to teach English to children becomes a form of shadow boxing that has less to do with pedagogical issues than with questions of social status and political power.

It does not help that the pedagogical issues are so poorly understood. Monolinguals tend to regard language learning as a zero-sum game. Any use of children's mother tongue for instruction, the assumption goes, is a diversion from English acquisition. Thus assigning English learners to bilingual classrooms would seem to delay their education.

Research has shown that precisely the opposite is true. Far from a waste of learning time, native-language lessons support the process of acquiring English while keeping students from falling behind in other subjects. Stephen Krashen, of the University of Southern California, points to numerous studies documenting the 'transfer' of literacy skills and academic knowledge between various languages, even when alphabets differ substantially. 'We learn to read by reading, by making sense of what we see on the page,' Krashen (1996: 4) explains. Thus 'it will be much easier to learn to read in a language we already understand.' And literacy need not be relearned as additional languages are acquired. 'Once you can read, you can read.'

Other studies confirm that, by the time children leave well-structured bilingual programs, typically after four to five years, they are outperforming their counterparts in non-bilingual programs and, in most cases, students from native-English backgrounds as well (Ramírez, 1998).

Yet such success stories remain poorly publicized. Until recently, bilingual educators have done little to explain their methods and goals, while the American media have become increasingly skeptical. 'If all I knew about bilingual education was what I read in the newspapers,' says Krashen, 'I'd vote against it, too.'

Mixed messages have compounded the public relations problem. Bilingual education, which originated as an effort to guarantee equal educational opportunities, is increasingly promoted as a form of multicultural enrichment. To counter the English-only mentality, advocates have coined the slogan English Plus. They argue that the United States remains an underdeveloped country where language skills are concerned. In a global economy, more multilingualism – not less – would clearly advance the national interest.

Some English-speaking parents have been receptive to the ‘bilingual is beautiful’ pitch. Over the past decade, growing numbers have enrolled their children in ‘dual immersion’ classrooms alongside minority children learning English. Yet, despite excellent reports on this method of cultivating fluency in two languages, probably no more than 20,000 English-background students are participating nationwide. Compare that with the 324,000 Canadian Anglophones enrolled in French immersion programs, in a country with one-tenth the population of the USA (Statistics Canada, 2003).

English Plus is a compelling set of policy arguments. As yet, however it appeals primarily to language teachers and ethnic minorities. Other Americans remain suspicious of the ‘plus.’ Most harbor the false impression that bilingual education is primarily about maintaining Hispanic cultures. Knowing a foreign language is wonderful, they say, but shouldn’t English come first?

The US language policy debate rarely seems to get past that question.

Notes

1. The number of states with active official-English laws grew to 25 by 2007.