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Introduction

*America's profusion of tongues has made her
a modern Babel, but a Babel in reverse.*

Einar Haugen (1972)

Language need not be a polarizing issue. In the United States, it rarely has been – certainly as compared with race, class, or religion. Given the right conditions, however, the politics of language can be just as visceral. In the last two decades, these conditions have included:

- an increase in immigration, mainly from Asia and Latin America, transforming the life of numerous communities, linguistically and otherwise;
- a backlash against the civil-rights gains of the 1960s and 1970s, leading to an emphasis on cultural and symbolic politics;
- an organized movement to limit the new ‘bilingualism’ by promoting English-only laws in the name of national unity; and
- politicians seeking ‘wedge issues’ to exploit for partisan purposes.

Americans have had relatively limited experience with conflicts over language. For most of our history, the hegemony of English seemed self-evident. Seldom did anyone perceive a threat from other tongues. Language diversity was often tolerated, occasionally repressed; mostly it was taken for granted. The US government hardly ever saw a need for legislation, or any other action, to regulate language usage. Its standard policy was to have *no policy* on language, explicitly defined and national in scope. States and localities were more likely to act in this area, sometimes to refuse but frequently to provide accommodations, such as bilingual instruction in public schools.

This history had less to do with any ideological ‘tradition’ on language than with the social phenomenon of ‘Babel in reverse.’ Like no other nation, the United States has exhibited a power to attract diverse peoples and to acculturate them rapidly. Contrary to myth, however, the process was not as simple as *e pluribus unum*. As fast as immigrant tongues were depleted, generally by the third generation, they were replenished by new arrivals. Non-English-speaking groups continued

to expand, and continued to be anglicized, largely without coercion from authorities. Pressure to speak English did feature in a campaign to 'Americanize the immigrant' in the early 1900s, but such episodes were the exception. As a result, language differences were rarely a source of division. When conflicts erupted, they usually involved repressive measures by government, such as the imposition of English-only rules in the classroom. For the most part, these policies were aimed at indigenous and conquered peoples, and their purpose was social control, not social integration. Anti-immigrant politics primarily took other forms – that is, until the 1980s.

So what has changed? Why has a movement emerged for the 'legal protection of English' and the legal restriction of other languages? Why have politicians encouraged this campaign and the attitudes it conveys? What does Official English legislation portend for minority rights and opportunities? What are its implications for efforts to save Native American languages from extinction? How will political assaults on bilingual education affect children who come to school speaking limited English? How should fair-minded Americans, especially educational practitioners and researchers, respond to such developments?

These questions have commanded my attention, not to mention fascination, since I went to work for *Education Week* back in 1985 and began to write about bilingual education. Over the years I have approached them from several vantage points. *Hold Your Tongue* (1992a) offers a journalistic account of the English-only movement and its impact in diverse communities. *Language Loyalties* (1992b) is a collection of essays and source materials on language policy in general and the English-only question in particular. *Bilingual Education* (4th edn, 1999) provides an overview of schooling for English learners, emphasizing issues of interest to educators.

This volume attempts a more direct and analytical approach. The articles collected here were written at different times, focusing on different problems of US language policy. But in one way or another, they all seek to address the overriding question: How should Americans respond to language diversity? There are three basic alternatives. We could continue dealing with diversity as a minor irritant, to be remedied when necessary on an *ad hoc* basis. Or we could treat it as a threat to the nation's harmony and prosperity, to be stamped out through English-only mandates. Or we could recognize it as cultural asset, a reservoir of potentially valuable skills, and a matter of human rights, to be encouraged and defended. Whether one relishes or despises diversity – or could care less – is a personal value judgment. Like it or not, however, bilingualism is a reality. The United States needs a coherent policy for managing its costs and benefits.

To understand what is at stake in these decisions, a historical perspec-

tive is essential. 'Anatomy of the English-Only Movement' considers the social and ideological sources of language restrictionism, from colonial times until the present. 'Boom to Bust: Official English in the 1990s' traces the campaign's recent advances and setbacks, with special emphasis to its legislative agenda.

Because bilingualism is typically framed as an 'immigrant issue,' the situation of indigenous peoples tends to be ignored. 'Endangered Native American Languages: What Is To Be Done, and Why?' outlines the crisis facing communities whose linguistic and cultural resources are eroding. 'Seven Hypotheses on Language Loss' describes efforts among several Indian tribes to reverse this trend and preserve their heritage while overcoming a host of practical obstacles.

Those most affected by today's language conflicts are among society's most vulnerable members: minority children learning English. 'The Political Paradox of Bilingual Education' analyzes the decline in support for native-language instruction even as such pedagogies were perfected and institutionalized. 'The Proposition 227 Campaign: A Post Mortem' examines the most serious defeat for bilingual education to date, the political tactics of its enemies, and the mistakes of its advocates.

Of course, most educators would prefer to avoid politics, an understandable reaction to the prevailing cant and demagoguery. But as the English-only forces grow more sophisticated and better organized, this approach becomes untenable. Public misunderstanding is so pervasive about bilingual education, for example, that the program's future is at risk. Increasingly it is politics, not pedagogy, that determines how children are taught. Attention must be paid to the debates now raging over language, or the voices of equity and diversity could one day be silenced.