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Language Policy as a tool for marginalization: the influence of the English-only movement in today's United States

Marc Deneire

Introduction

In this article, I will argue that the English-Only movement that has been very active in the US in the last 25 years has little to do with language, but instead, is motivated by symbolic and linguistic racism in an effort to further exclude groups of people who already live in the margins of American society. With 82 % of the population speaking English only, and less than 8% speaking English “less than very well” in 2007¹, one finds it hard to understand how this rapidly assimilating population might represent a danger to the country's unity. Similarly, the 3.5 % illegal immigration hardly justifies the stigmatization of immigrants by politicians, the press, and the numerous local radio talk shows.

The discussion around the status of the English language in the construction of the Union started in the early stages of the American colony. Writing in the Federalist papers in 1788, John Jay expressed the following view:

[P]rovidence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, *speaking the same language*, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs. (my emphasis)²

In his efforts to create a language Academy, John Adams also proposed to make English an official language for both the Union and Individual states, arguing that “the form of government has an influence upon language, and language in its turn influences not only the form of government, but the temper, sentiments of the people.”³

¹ H.B.Shin et R.A. Kominski, “Language use in the United States: 2007,” *US Census Bureau*, issued April 2010.

² Cited in : J.N. Perea, “Demography and distrust: An essay on American languages, cultural pluralism, and official English” *Minnesota Law Review*, n°262, 1992, p. 271.

³ J.N. Perea, *op.cit*, p. 292

Overtone of linguistic nationalism could also be heard among some leading intellectuals and linguists at the time. For example, Noah Webster pleaded for the recognition of a standard national language: “[A] national language is a band of national union. Every engine should be employed to render the people of this country national; to call their attachments home to their own country; and to inspire them with the pride of national character.”⁴

Beyond linguistic ideology, political realism may also explain why the founding fathers were very cautious in their positions concerning language and immigration. Indeed, they were very acutely aware of the presence of various national groups and populations in the colonies and conscious that if they wanted their ideas to spread, respect for other nationalities and official publications in other languages would be necessary.

I. Linguistic hegemony

“The battle for nationhood,” writes Michael Billig, “is a battle for hegemony, by which a part claims to speak for the whole nation and to represent the national essence.”⁵ Using the constitution written by a select Anglo-Saxon elite without any participation of other groups, including the natives of the land, Anglo-Saxons managed to form an hegemonic block through the making of consent, a consent that was all the more readily obtained as most European immigrants shared the same monolingual ideology concerning nation-state building. In the early stages, states and territories had a strong foreign-born presence, and so, allowances were made for other languages through publication of official documents in other languages until the administration was almost fully anglicized.

In California, the first 1849 State Constitution was published in both Spanish and English and included one provision that “[a]ll laws, decrees, regulations, and provisions, which from their nature require publication, shall be published in English

⁴ Perea, *op.cit.*, p. 298

⁵ M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, London, Sage Publication, 1995, p.27.

and Spanish.”⁶ However, the gold rush rapidly anglicized the State. Soon, the few native californios who participated in the rush were ironically labelled “foreigners in their own land.” By 1870, they had lost political influence and the 1879 California constitution prohibited the publication of the laws in any language other than English.

The same could be observed in New-Mexico, be it at a slower pace in the absence of a sudden influx such as that provoked by the Gold Rush in California. In addition, there were only about 100 English settlers in the territory prior to 1846 so that it took much longer for English speakers to become the dominant group. Until 1870, laws were usually enacted in Spanish, and then translated into English. After 1870, English became prevalent, but it is only in 1912, when a majority of the population was English-speaking for the first time that the state gained statehood. Ten years earlier, Senator Albert Beveridge presiding over the hearings concerning New Mexico’s and Arizona’s claims for statehood recommended that admission be delayed until a time “when the mass of the people, or even a majority of them shall, in the usage and employment of their daily life, have become identical in language and customs with the great number of American people; when the immigrants of the English-speaking people who have been citizens of the other states [will have done] its modifying work with the ‘Mexican element.’”⁷

More recently, the same argument was used to oppose access to statehood for Puerto-Rico. US English chairman Mauro Mujica was outraged when in April 2010, the House of Representatives passed the Porto-Rico Democracy Act (H.R. 2499) even though an amendment that would have required English as the sole of official language was defeated. Mujica explained that: “No state has ever come into the Union where its core organs of government operate in a foreign language and Puerto-Rico must not be an exception.”⁸

⁶ Perea, op.cit., p317.

⁷ D. Baron, *The English-Only Question: An official language for Americans?* New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 101

⁸ See <http://www.us-english.org/view/773>, downloaded May 2011.

II. Nativism and the psychological enforcement of conformity through language

Tolerance towards the foreign-born and negative reactions against “foreign elements” are clearly linked to immigration. The first surge in nativism occurred in the 1850’s but almost completely vanished during the civil war when practically all foreign-born Americans “flocked to the colors” to defend their country. It picked up again in the late 19th century as a reaction against Southern European Catholic immigration, especially after the Haymarket incidents. One newspaper lashed out against the “invasion of venomous reptiles”; another against the “long-haired, wild-eyed, bad smelling, atheistic reckless foreign wretches who never did an honest hour’s work in their lives.”⁹ In 1891, Henry Cabot Lodge first proposed to introduce a literacy test, a proposal with clearly racist overtones. The proposal was that all male adults should be excluded from admission who were unable to read and write in their own language. This, it was estimated, would cut immigration from southern and eastern Europe by half, while more “desirable” immigration would not suffer at all.¹⁰ In defending the test in 1892, Senator Chandler claimed: “No one has suggested a race distinction. We are confronted with the fact, however, that the poorest immigrants do come from certain races.”¹¹ Several bills successfully passed the House and Senate, but were vetoed successively by Presidents Cleveland, Taft, and Wilson until it passed over Wilson’s veto in 1917. The test excluded “all aliens over sixteen years of age, physically able of reading, who cannot read the English language, or some other language or dialect, including Hebrew or Yiddish.”¹² The context of the war against Germany strongly reinforced the reaction against “foreign” elements. Wartime hysteria gave rise to movements such as the “one-hundred percent Americanism” which “felt sure that the nation would never be safe until every vestige of German culture had been stamped

⁹ J. Higham, *Strangers in the land: Pattern of American Nativism 1860-1925*, New York, Atheneum, 1967, pp. 55-88.

¹⁰ J. Lescott-Leszczynski, *The History of US Ethnic Policy and its Impact on European Ethnics*, Boulder and London, Westview, 1984, p. 18

¹¹ J. Higham, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

¹² J.N. Perea, *op.cit.*, p.335.

out."¹³ In 1917, Theodore Roosevelt declared: "We have no room for but one language here and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as American, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house."¹⁴

Following strong restrictive immigration policies, nativist feelings dropped at the end of the 1920's, but by that time, most foreign language schools and newspapers had disappeared.

As immigration picked up again in the 1980's, following the signing of the 1980 Refugee Act, nativist reactions emerged again in the form of the English-Only movement which has introduced 5 to 10 bills in every Congress since 1990. The movement started when in 1982, former senator Hayakawa sought an amendment to the constitution making English the official language of the United States. The declaration of John Tanton, who co-founded U.S. English with him, displays the same racist overtones as their nativist predecessor:

Perhaps this is the first instance in which those with their pants up are going to get caught by those with their pants down. . . . As whites see their power and control of their lives declining, will they simply go quietly into the night? Or will there be an explosion . . . ? We are building in a deadly disunity.¹⁵

U.S. English has been very successful in passing English-Only legislation at the state level. Indeed, whereas before 1969 only 2 states had passed laws naming English the sole language of the state (Illinois and Nebraska) 17 states had done so by 1990 and 29 by 2009, and some are presently considering such legislation (Oklahoma). In addition, many cities are implementing English-Only legislation, provoking heated debates. In July 2010 for example, the City Council of Lino Lakes, a Twin Cities, MN suburb passed an English-only resolution. The following excerpts from an on-line discussion group encapsulate the real motivations of the vote:

¹³ J. Higham, op.cit., p.208.

¹⁴ Cited in: J. Crawford, *Language Loyalties: A Source Book on the Official English Controversy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 146.

¹⁵ Cited in J. Crawford, op.cit, p.173.

“Learn English” is almost completely a nonstarter for me. Immigrant families nearly-inevitably *do* learn English, and the assimilation takes one or two generations after immigration. ...Here in SW MN, that’s how it worked for Germans and Swedes in 1910, and it’s how it’s working for Mexicans, East Africans, and Burmese now.”

Well, to a large extent, it is a race issue. In the same way that poverty is, in many ways, a race issue. Whether the residents of Lino Lakes like it or not, the people being affected by this resolution are not blonde-haired, blue-eyed Swedes who want to speak Swedish. The people this affects will be Hmong, Somalis, Ethiopians, Latinos, and other non-white immigrant groups in the Twin Cities area. ¹⁶

III. English-only and linguistic racism

In this section, I will try to show that the recent attempts to impose English-only legislation continues a tradition of symbolic racism, in this case linguistic racism, that aims at marginalizing some categories of the population because of their ethnic difference. For this purpose I will use some of the most common characterizations of the symbolic racism in the social-psychological literature and illustrate how its main features are expressed in the internet forums containing the reactions to two recent attempts at impose English-only legislation

While focusing on the black population, social-psychologists have characterized symbolic racism as a coherent political belief system that contains the following themes:

- (a) Blacks no longer face much prejudice or discrimination,
- (b) Blacks’s failure to progress results from their unwillingness to work hard enough
- (c) Blacks are demanding too much too fast,
- (d) Blacks have gotten more than they deserve.”¹⁷

They add that symbolic racism reflects “a blend of strong, traditional American moral values with mild amounts of racial anxiety and antagonism”, and “a blend of anti-black affect and the kind of traditional moral embodied in the Protestant Ethic ... rooted in deep-seated feelings of social morality and propriety and in early learned racial fears and stereotypes ... more likely traceable to pre-adult socialization than to current racial threat.” Commenting on the overtly racist viewpoints expressed by the founders and of

¹⁶ <http://twentytwowords.com/2010/07/28/elitists-in-minnesota-town-lino-lakes-approve-english-only-resolution/>. Accessed, August 25, 2010.

¹⁷ D.O. Sears and P.J. Henry, “The origins of symbolic racism,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, n° 85/2, 2003, p. 260

English-only movement, linguist Richard Ruiz adds that the following arguments are used to marginalize minority language groups:

- (a) ethnic groups are less willing to assimilate, resulting in social fragmentation
- (b) bilingual services are inordinately expensive to the tax-payer of the state
- (c) The primacy of English is at risk and is threatened by competing “official languages”¹⁸

Teun Van Dijk and his colleagues have shown that one of the most commonly-used discursive strategies in everyday talk about immigrants and minorities is the use of disclaimers which they define as “semantic moves with a positive part about US, and a negative part about THEM.” Examples are: “I’m not a racist, but ...,” “some of them are smart, but ...”¹⁹ These strategies are abundantly used in the three internet forums we will now examine.²⁰ In our analysis, we found ten types of such moves.

1. English-only is not racism

- *“It’s not about racism or anything,” Mr. Watson said. “I just think we need to save our money in this economy, and we can’t be translating everything into any language all the time.” “Please explain why you think these bills are racist, or marginalize your community. I’m not saying that they don’t, I just didn’t see any evidence to suggest that it changes anything at all.”*
- *“Hey Rube. Add me to the xenophobe list. A country of two languages is a divided one. If we all melt into one big pot of Americans we will not have two languages.”*

2. Failure to progress results from their unwillingness to work hard enough:

Immigrants are featured as lazy people in contrast with hard-working Americans.

¹⁸ Cited in E.J. Johnson, “(Re)defining freedom of speech: Language policy, education, and language rights in the United States,” *Apples - Journal of Applied Language Studies*, n° 3/1, 2009, p.12

¹⁹ T.A. van Dijk, “Discourse and racism,” in T. Goldberg and J. Solomos (eds), *A companion to ethnic and racial studies*, Malden, Ma, Wiley-Blackwell, p.150. See also, e.g. E. Bonilla-Silva and T. A. Forman, “I’m not a racist but ...: mapping White college students’ racial ideology in the USA,” *Discourse and Society*, n° 11/1, 2000, pp. 50-85.

²⁰ Besides the Minnesota site mentioned above, we also examined reactions to an English-only proposal in Texas on a conservative site : <http://politics.gather.com/viewArticle.action?articleId=281474979469978>, as well as the reactions to a 2009 failed English-only initiative in Nashville, Tennessee.

- *There are people that have been in this country for years and still don't speak English. Why? Apparently they're apathetic to the point they don't care. Why should they when we coddle them by providing literature, signs, "press 1 for English," and translators (sic). Good luck finding a job.*
- *They need to at least show an effort that they want a better way of life than the way they were living in their countries.*

3. Demanding too much too fast/unfair demands/special privileges/special interests.

For many participants in the forums, accommodating to other languages represents a violation of some kind of "natural order." Speakers of other languages are presented as profiteers, even parasites.

- *You have to speak my language, not the other way around. You came to me for a job, I didn't come to you.*
- *If you come here from another country, you should learn to speak the language, which is English. Don't like it go back to where you came from. Why, should we have to give, give, give.*
- *The entire country should be English why let these filthy blood sucking cockroaches get special privileges?! They are here illegally (sic) !*
- *From where I stand I've seen this country bend over backwards to accommodate them which always leads to more and more accommodations once it's started as we've seen. We wouldn't be so divided today if we had let them know from the get go that it was them that needed to change.. not us*

4. Immigrants have gotten what they deserve

Often, there is a feeling that immigrants are not loyal, that they do not respect the rules of the game. Therefore, they are not only the victims but also the cause of discrimination.

- *Condemnable, abhorrent, intolerable are words to describe recent beatings of Hispanics on Long Island. However, while not intentional, some of this has been brought upon themselves. A local resident, who has been in the US for ten years, was interviewed Friday about the beatings, through a translator. Frequently Hispanics are heard talking about how they will be sending money to, or are waiting to make enough money to go back to "my country".*

(5) Fear of being overcome, of a reversal in power relations

The expression of racism is clear in these statements, both in terms of color and culture. Even in very "white" neighborhoods in the Twin Cities suburbs, there is a fear that white supremacy might be lost:

- *If I went to another country, I would expect them to speak in their language and I would have to adapt. I would be a guest in their land, guests aren't supposed to take over.*
- *You just can't stand it that we have a majority anglo/white country. You can't wait to turn it into a brown/hispanic country even though hispanics are the majority in 22 countries on the Western Hemisphere already"*
- *It USE TO BE that immigrants came here because of the American dream, ideals, and values. But look around...now immigrants are coming here trying to turn US into a 3rd world nation!*

(6) Danger to civilization

In some of the most extreme statements, the United States and their citizens are seen as civilized and other countries as uncivilized. The question of loyalty is raised again, but there is also a clear sense of cultural superiority related to the English language:

- *Illegals are killing our healthcare systems all across the country. So the ones here who do not speak our language and who do not respect our values and way of life need to go back to their countries and clean them up instead of bring our country down to their level. (Tn forums)*
- *House Speaker Newt Gingrich argued for the bill, noting that California public schools teach academic subjects in more than 80 languages, and Chicago schools teach in 100 languages. He warned that a continuation of such trends would lead to "decay of the core parts of our civilization."*
- *We need English only so this dam country doesn't turn into some dam banana republic. Hasta La Vista me.*

(7) Babel/divisiveness

Most participants share the same monolingual ideology, that is, the belief that multilingualism automatically leads to division and balkanization:

- *I am all for diversity in cultural activities, cuisine and neighborhoods, but is it too much to ask for this Tower of Babel mentality to realize common sense? Chicago and Illinois bend over backwards providing election materials, city, county and state governmental forms and signage to myriad languages, mostly in Spanish, Mandarin Chinese and Polish.*
- *One person mentioned the cost of the election as a reason for not having an English only vote. Consider this: the election is a one-time cost. The cost of printing multi language documents is an infinite cost that could run into the millions, not to mention fragmenting the culture.*

- *I'm not against helping adults and children become proficient in English. I am against making our country a reflection of the Tower of Babel...with all of us speaking but noone understanding each.*

8. Ancestry

Many use the common argument that their forefathers readily and willingly learned English even though, as we mentioned before, numerous schools in German, French, Polish, and other languages still existed at the beginning of the 20th century:

- *"My grandparents came from Sweden," said resident Carl Palmquist. "I remember the stories, where they used to say it was hard for them to learn English. But they did, and they practiced it in the home, they practiced it at work and they learned English.*
- *When my husband's German ancestors came to the USA they had to learn to speak English. They did. When my own Swedish ancestors came to this country in the late 1890's, they had to learn to speak English.*
- *Yes, the United States was built from the sound of many voices, many languages. BUT everyone back then LEARNED ENGLISH at some point*

9. Americanism/respect of moral values

Social psychologists argue that symbolic racism often originates in a conservative moral code, what McConahay and Hough call "the traditional religious and value socialization of secular American civil Protestantism"²¹ that include hard work, individualism, obedience and discipline. The feeling that speakers of other languages do not respect these values is often expressed in our corpus:

- *My ancestors came over and had to assimilate by learning the language, they were given no special concessions and they were not catered to, they worked hard learned the language and became true Americans that fought and were proud of their country*

²¹ Cited in Sears and Henry, op.cit., p.261.

- *So the ones here who do not speak our language and who do not respect of values and way of life need to go back to their countries and clean them up instead of bring our country down to their level. Tn forums*
- *Learning English - though it's not a law that they should do so - would be a small price to pay for anyone with integrity and principle. Unfortunately, this concept has been so disregarded that even some narrow-set American-born people have overlooked it. Thugs, another yarn in the American fabric unravels Tx forum*
- *Vincent, Excuse me!?!? My family including myself has worked our butts off for the 300+ years we have been on this Continent. The majority of WASP are hard working, law abiding, and taxpaying. How about not going out of your way to look ignorant by attacking an entire group of Americans! Tn forum*

10. Political allegiance

Social psychologists Sears and Henry have demonstrated empirically that even though general conservatism and racial prejudice are separate and distinctive psychological constructs, symbolic racism is grounded equally in both. "Symbolic racism," they write, "is the glue that links political conservatism to racial prejudice among Whites in the contemporary era."²² It is this mixture of political conservatism and prejudice that is expressed in the following statements:

- *You clueless liberals who so slavishly desire this forced multiculturalism should move to California, and see what a cesspool it's become. It's why I fled to the small town south, where our mother tongue is respected. You are in America? Speak English.*
- *I will never understand the pandering my local government wastes my tax money under the banner of being inclusive, except that it helps bring votes for the notorious Chicago Democratic machine. This isn't assimilation; it is consternation.*

²² Sears and Henry, op. cit., p.264

- *Wake up folks, the American language is under attack and I suspect the ACLU is organizing the charge*
- *It was President Reagan that put the end to the commie pleasing Metric America scam from democrats, that wanted America to take the commie measurements to accommodate the lefts Ideas.*

Conclusion

The discourse used by the English-only proponents represents a modern form of racism that is in direct line with the old-fashioned “redneck” or “Jim Crow” racism of the pre-civil rights era. To conclude, I will use a quote from my corpus that shows that this kind of off-the-shelves ideology is not shared by all Americans:

This kind of nativist xenophobia has been discredited in more enlightened quarters for some time now. It's a thinly veiled re-hash of the White Anglo nativism that reared its ugly head when the Germans, Irish, then Mediterraneans came here in large numbers, in the 19th and 20th Centuries, and needs to be exposed as such, in the normal discourse about this proposal. The “undesirables” as the Irish, Italians and Jews were called by the nativists of those early immigration waves, eventually melded in and assimilated into the American way, quite successfully. All current evidence shows that similar processes are in effect with the more recent immigrant groups, though perhaps at a slower pace; contemporary air travel and communications technology allows newer immigrants to “hold on” culturally to their countries of origin, including use of their languages, in ways not possible for the earlier arrivals. Most scholarly studies show that the vast majority of immigrants eventually become proficient in English and assimilate fully, so what's the real issue? It's really xenophobia and racism, masquerading as a defense of the English language, a stance which is totally unnecessary. The idea is also very impractical. As our increasingly global and multicultural society imports and adopts words from other languages, especially Spanish, spoken on these shores about 100 years before the first English words were uttered in North America, who would “police” the English only laws? What to do with foreign

words such as "dollar, ranch, junta, armada, flotilla, patio, barbecue, vamoose, buccaneer, filibuster" (all Spanish) and others such as fait accompli, au fait, bien pensant (all widely in use in America, but French). Would those terms have to be banned and replaced? By what? Who would decide? Policing such laws could take us to some pretty ridiculous scenarios. Hopefully the people of Nashville will see through this silliness and laugh the proponents off the legislative stage.

This participant adequately summarizes the argument of this paper, with, however, some minor inaccuracies. Indeed, demographers²³ have shown that recent immigrants assimilate linguistically much faster than past generations. Further, they argue, no data suggest that English-Only legislation ever had any real impact on the amount of services offered in a foreign language. Rather, it was noted that services in Spanish are frequently offered in states with large Hispanic populations, even where English is the official language (e.g., Illinois and California) and were generally absent in states with few Hispanics and no official English legislation.²⁴ Courts usually consider Official English legislation as "symbolic statements" with no significant effect in real life, except in cases of discrimination.²⁵ "Consequently," writes Veltman, legislation designed to restrict the use of Spanish represents a statement that the English language group is dominant and that Spanish-speaking people need not expect a particularly warm welcome."²⁶

The question remains why immigrants themselves often accept and even support these language policies²⁷. In this respect, one needs to remember that monolingual ideologies were shaped in the 18th and 19th century Europe and are now widely shared in most Western countries. The power of language is not perceived as oppressive because, in the words of Foucault, it "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches

²³ E.g., C. Veltman, Quebec, Canada, and the United States : Social reality and language rights, in T. Ricento and B. Burnaby (eds), *Language and politics in the United States and Canada: myths and realities*, Mahwah, New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998, pp.301-315.

²⁴ D.F. Marshall, cited in C. Veltman, op.cit., p.304

²⁵ S. Miner, Legal implications of the Official English declaration, in T. Ricento and B. Burnaby (eds), op.cit, p.186.

²⁶ C. Veltman, op.cit., p.304.

²⁷ See, e.g., Linda Chavez' « Center for Equal Opportunity » : <http://www.ceousa.org/content/view/506/122/>.

their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives”²⁸.

If, as Colin Williams writes, “[t]he foundation of any modern democracy is the ability of its citizens to derive maximum security from contributing to the wealth of society,”²⁹ it is time for us as sociolinguists to actively develop language awareness among our students and in society at large.

DRAFT

²⁸ M Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Trans. Colin Gordon et al. New York: Pantheon, 1980, p.39.

²⁹ C.H. Williams, Introduction : Respecting the citizens—Reflections on language policy in Canada and the United States, in T. Ricento and B. Burnaby (eds), *op.cit.*, p.2.