

Geography and Public Policy

An Official U.S. Language?

Within recent years in Lowell, Massachusetts, public school courses have been offered in Spanish, Khmer, Lao, Portuguese, and Vietnamese, and all messages from schools to parents have been translated into five languages. Polyglot New York City has given bilingual programs in Spanish, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Russian, Korean, Vietnamese, French, Greek, Arabic, and Bengali. In most states, it is possible to get a high-school-equivalency diploma without knowing English because tests are offered in French and Spanish. In at least 39 states, driving tests have been available in foreign languages; California has provided 30 varieties, New York 23, and Michigan 20, including Arabic and Finnish. And as required by the 1965 federal Voting Rights Act, multilingual ballots are provided in some 300 electoral jurisdictions in 30 states.

These, and innumerable other evidences of governmentally sanctioned linguistic diversity, may come as a surprise to those many Americans who assume that English is the official language of the United States. It isn't;

nowhere does the Constitution provide for an official language, and no federal law specifies one. The country was built by a great diversity of cultural and linguistic immigrants who nonetheless shared an eagerness to enter mainstream American life. At the start of the 21st century, a reported 18% of all U.S. residents spoke a language other than English in the home. In California public schools, 1 out of 3 students uses a non-English tongue within the family. In Washington, D.C. schools, students speak 127 languages and dialects, a linguistic diversity duplicated in other major city school systems.

Nationwide bilingual teaching began as an offshoot of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, was encouraged by a Supreme Court opinion authored by Justice William O. Douglas, and has been actively promoted by the U.S. Department of Education under the Bilingual Education Act of 1974 as an obligation of local school boards. Its purpose has been to teach subject matter to minority-language children in the language in which they think while introducing them to English, with the hope of achieving English proficiency in 2 or 3 years. Disappointment with the results achieved led to a successful 1998 California

anti-bilingual education initiative, Proposition 227, to abolish the program. Similar rejection elsewhere—Arizona in 2000 and Massachusetts in 2003, for example—has followed California's lead.

Oponents of the implications of governmentally encouraged multilingual education, bilingual ballots, and ethnic separatism argue that a common language is the unifying glue of the United States and all countries; without that glue, they fear, the process of "Americanization" and *acculturation*—the adoption by immigrants of the values, attitudes, ways of behavior, and speech of the receiving society—will be undermined. Convinced that early immersion and quick proficiency in English is the only sure way for minority newcomers to gain necessary access to jobs, higher education, and full integration into the economic and social life of the country, proponents of "English only" use in public education, voting, and state and local governmental agencies, successfully passed Official English laws or constitutional amendments in 27 states from the late 1980s to 2002.

Although the amendments were supported by sizeable majorities of the voting population, resistance to them—and to their political

including the Philippines (with between 80 and 110 Malayo-Polynesian languages) and Papua New Guinea (with over 850 distinct Papuan tongues), have a European language as at least one of their official tongues.

Increasingly, the "purity" of official European languages has been threatened by the popular and widespread inclusion of English words and phrases in everyday speech, press, and television. So common has such adoption become, in fact, that some nearly new language variants are now recognized: *franglais* in France and *Denglish* in Germany are the best-known examples. Both have spurred resistance movements from officially sanctioned language monitors of, respectively, the French Academy and the Institute for the German Language. Poland, Spain, and Latvia are among other European states seeking to preserve the purity of their official languages from contamination by English or other foreign borrowings. Japan's Council on the Japanese Language is doing the same.

In some countries, multilingualism has official recognition through designation of more than a single state language. Canada and Finland, for example, have two official languages (*bilingualism*), reflecting rough equality in numbers or influence of separate linguistic populations comprising a single country. In a few

multilingual countries, more than two official languages have been designated. Bolivia and Belgium have three official tongues and Singapore has four. South Africa's constitution designates 11 official languages, and India gives official status to 18 languages at the regional, though not at the national, level.

Multilingualism may reflect significant cultural and spatial divisions within a country. In Canada, the Official Languages Act of 1969 accorded French and English equal status as official languages of the Parliament and of government throughout the nation. French-speakers are concentrated in the Province of Quebec, however, and constitute a culturally distinct population sharply divergent from the English-speaking majority of other parts of Canada (Figure 5.16). Within sections of Canada, even greater linguistic diversity is recognized; the legislature of the Northwest Territories, for example, has eight official languages—six native, plus English and French.

Few countries remain purely *monolingual*, with only a single language of communication for all purposes among all citizens, though most are officially so. Past and recent movements of peoples as colonists, refugees, or migrants have assured that most of the world's countries contain linguistically mixed populations.

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and cultural implications—has been in every instance strong and persistent. Ethnic groups, particularly Hispanics, who are the largest of the linguistic groups affected, charged that they were evidence of blatant Anglo-centric racism, discriminatory and repressive in all regards. Some educators argued persuasively that all evidence proved that while immigrant children eventually acquire English proficiency in any event, they do so with less harm to their self-esteem and subject matter acquisition when initially taught in their own language. Business people with strong minority labor and customer ties and political leaders—often themselves members of ethnic communities or with sizable minority constituencies—argued against “discriminatory” language restrictions.

And historians noted that it had all been unsuccessfully tried before. The anti-Chinese Workingmen’s Party in 1870s California led the fight for English-only laws in that state. The influx of immigrants from central and southeastern Europe at the turn of the century led Congress to make oral English a requirement for naturalization, and anti-German sentiment during and after World War I led some states to ban any use of German. The Supreme

Court struck down those laws in 1923, ruling that the “protection of the Constitution extends to all, to those who speak other languages as well as to those born with English on their tongue.” Following suit, some of the recent state language amendments have also been voided by state or federal courts. In ruling its state’s English-only law unconstitutional, Arizona’s Supreme Court in 1998 noted it “chills First Amendment rights.”

To counter those judicial restraints and the possibility of an eventual multilingual, multicultural United States in which English and, likely, Spanish would have co-equal status and recognition, U.S. English—an organization dedicated to the belief that “English is, and ever must remain, the only official language of the people of the United States”—actively supports the proposed U.S. Constitutional amendment first introduced in Congress by former Senator S. I. Hayakawa in 1981, and resubmitted by him and others in subsequent years. The proposed amendment would simply establish English as the official national language but would impose no duty on people to learn English and would not infringe on any right to use other languages. Whether or not these modern attempts to

designate an official U.S. language eventually succeed, they represent a divisive subject of public debate affecting all sectors of American society.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you think multiple languages and ethnic separatism represent a threat to U.S. cultural unity that can be avoided only by viewing English as a necessary unifying force? Or do you think making English the official language might divide its citizens and damage its legacy of tolerance and diversity? Why or why not?
2. Do you feel that immigrant children would learn English faster if bilingual classes were reduced and immersion in English was more complete? Or do you think that a slower pace of English acquisition is acceptable if subject matter comprehension and cultural self-esteem are enhanced? Why or why not?
3. Do you think Official English laws serve to inflame prejudice against immigrants or to provide all newcomers with a common standard of admission to the country’s political and cultural mainstream?

Maintenance of native languages among such populations is not assured, of course. Where numbers are small or pressures for integration into an economically and socially dominant culture are strong, immigrant and aboriginal (native) linguistic minorities tend to adopt the majority or official language for all purposes. On the other hand, isolation and relatively large numbers of speakers may serve to preserve native tongues. In Canada, for example, aboriginal languages with large populations of speakers—Cree, Ojibwe, and Inuktitut—are well maintained in their areas of concentration (respectively, northern Quebec, the northern prairies, and Nunavut). In contrast, much smaller language groups in southern and coastal British Columbia have a much lower ratio of retention among native speakers.

Language, Territoriality, and Identity

The designation of more than one official language does not always satisfy the ambitions of linguistically distinct groups for recognition and autonomy. Language is an inseparable part of group identity and a defining characteristic of ethnic and cultural

distinction. The view that cultural heritage is rooted in language is well-established and found throughout the world, as is the feeling that losing linguistic identity is the worst and final evidence of discrimination and subjugation. Language has often been the focus of separatist movements, especially of spatially distinct linguistic groups outside the economic heartlands of the strongly centralized countries to which they are attached.

In Europe, highly centralized France, Spain, Britain—and Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union before their dismemberment—experienced such language “revolts” and acknowledged, sometimes belatedly, the local concerns they express. Until 1970, when the ban on teaching regional tongues was dropped, the spoken regional languages and dialects of France were ignored and denied recognition by the state. Since the late 1970s, Spain not only has relaxed its earlier total rejection of Basque and Catalan as regional languages and given state support to instruction in them, but also has recognized Catalan as a co-official language in its home region in northeastern Spain. In Britain, parliamentary debates concerning greater regional autonomy in the United Kingdom have resulted in bilingual road and informational signs in Wales, a publicly supported Welsh-language television channel, and compulsory teaching of Welsh in all schools in Wales.