

## THE ENGLISH-ONLY MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

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*Language has caused (and is causing) a heated debate in the United States. This is due to the fact that English has always operated as the national language without having officially been declared as such. There seems to be a pervasive sense that to be an American one must be able to speak English.*

In recent years, recognition that the United States lacks any official language policy has led to attempts to establish such policy. Organizations were formed with the purpose of defending the national language from the alleged attack of minority languages by making it the subject of official-language laws. Many politicians took part in the debate, the latest addition being Presidential candidate Mitt Romney, who has been criticized for supporting English-only while also running Spanish-language commercials<sup>1</sup>.

This essay will provide an insight into the official English movement, explaining why is it still relevant today. Far from being a symbolic issue, the promotion of English in favor of other languages is fundamentally political.

"The United States has probably been the home of more bilingual speakers than any country in the world"<sup>2</sup>. This statement by linguist Einar Haugen points to the obvious: the United States has never had a sole official language. There is great linguistic and cultural diversity as for more than two centuries, immigrants came from all over the world to settle there, bringing with them their own culture, values and language. This multiplicity of languages, though, does not by any means limit the importance of the only common language. Ever since its foundations, there has been a dominant language, the one of its colonizers. The variety today known as Standard American English gradually emerged, incorporating native words and developing its own accent and spelling.

The Founding Fathers deliberately decided not to designate English as the official language of the country. While the U.S. English website suggests that "It simply may not have occurred to them"<sup>3</sup>, Heath, author of numerous works on language policy and planning, assumes that the decision was actively avoided, out of respect for the nation's traditional diversity. The idea was considered to be hostile to the interests and interdependence of the respective states and a tolerant attitude seemed more favorable<sup>4</sup>.

Until the 1980s anti-minority politics did not demand legal protection of English and the restriction of other languages. Although language issues were present they were never considered to be significant in the political arena, given the predominance of the national tongue, which has traditionally had a *de facto* status.

In the 1980s, though, a change in the conditions of linguistic diversity ethnic intolerance assumed a new guise: English-only. As Crawford<sup>5</sup> notes, the fervor was not so much for English as against the growing prominence of other languages.



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Increasing minority language rights seemed to threaten the well-established hegemony of English in the US linguistic market, one that had survived centuries of immigration and of diffused multilingualism. In those years government funded programs seemed to discourage English-language acquisition: bilingual schooling, bilingual driver's license and bilingual forms<sup>6</sup>.

Such anxieties and resentments have given rise to the movement to declare English the nation's official language. What made the campaign successful was the fact that it was promoted by a powerful and highly funded lobby, U.S. English, which emphasized the need to promote English-only laws in the name of national unity. It was thanks to this organization that the movement gained national recognition.

The modern English-only movement was born in 1983, when then Senator S. I. Hayakawa and John Tanton, a Michigan ophthalmologist, environmentalist and population control activist, founded an organization called U.S. English, committed to promoting the use of English in the political, economic, and intellectual life of the nation<sup>7</sup>. Their mission was to pass a law declaring English as the official language, in order to expand opportunities for immigrants to learn and speak English, the single greatest empowering tool that immigrants must have to succeed<sup>8</sup>.

The covert aim of U.S. English has been to suppress bilingual educational programs and replace them by short-term transitional program. Those legislative actions aroused the interest of the U.S. English movement because more Federal and State money was devoted to instruction in a foreign language. U.S. English has been rejecting those laws and questioned both the cost and the efficiency of bilingual education. Rather than reaffirming the unifying role of the English language in America, the organization has been posing significant threats to the rights of people with limited English proficiency, by serving to hinder their access to society.

According to Citrin, "economic conflict and cultural resentment are the leading alternative explanations for the current controversy over language policy in the United States"<sup>9</sup>. U.S. English has sprung up advocating a legislation to ensure the status of English as the national language out of fear of losing linguistic hegemony.

From 1983 to the late 1990s, U.S. English has been remarkably successful in promoting the English-only ideology in Congress, state legislatures and ballot campaigns. This amendment failed to be enacted by the 97th Congress and was then resubmitted to each Congress since 1981 but over 50 bills were proposed by the movement to declare English the official language of the United States<sup>10</sup>. Since its creation in 1983, the movement has gathered more than 1.7 million supporters and an annual budget of 5 million dollars. Between 1981 and 2009, under the influence of U.S. English, 30 out of the 50 American states passed Official English laws.

At present, most Americans, native-born or newly-arrived, recognize that the ability to speak English is essential to participation in American life. Not all Americans have that ability and measures have been introduced to make multilingual services and bilingual education available in an attempt to provide equally for all citizens regardless of language background. Some people, however, see multilingual legislation as counter to the traditional ideal of the 'melting pot'<sup>11</sup>, where the goal is assimilation to the majority culture, and the movement to make English the official language of the United States is in full swing.

What English-only advocates are doing here is concealing their real interests with appeals to patriotism in order to gain public consent. The hegemony of English in fact is not at stake, neither in the United States nor in the world. It is, on the contrary, minority

languages that are disappearing. As Fishman<sup>12</sup> argued, generally speaking, the fewer the immigrants, the greater their dispersion, the greater their urbanization and education in the host language, and the greater their occupational interaction with the host society, it is less likely that immigrants will be able to maintain intimate language and behavior networks.

A more critical look at American linguistic history will tell that Anglicization is the actual trend. Polls and statistics made by the amendment proponents are flawed and unpersuasive<sup>13</sup>. Supporters of official English seem to be making the mistake of equating the obviousness of language usage with its importance to national unity. Immigrants keep on assimilating and on picking up the language in the process.

Politically, U.S. English fits no predictable pattern. Despite its controversial aspects and characters of social injustice, the issue has been supported both by democrats and republicans, liberals and conservatives. According to polls, the official language legislation is backed up by 60 to 90 percent of the population<sup>14</sup>. No other issue has been so widely accepted and yet so unsuccessful in Senate. In fact, to this day English-only laws have been approved in many States but not at a national level.

According to supporters, English has always been the United States' common language, a means of resolving conflicts in a nation of diverse racial, ethnic and religious groups. In these terms, the official language is a unifying bond and a tool for economic advancement. They seem to suggest that without official language immigrants will no longer be motivated to learn English but they will keep their own language and never integrate in the American society. An English language amendment would therefore send a message to immigrants encouraging them to join in rather than remain apart.

Since 1980, the number of minority-language speakers has actually increased but, given the fact that the United States have managed without an official language for more than two hundred years, the alarmism seem ill-founded. The way in which U.S. English has been putting emphasis on these numbers shows anxieties that have little to do with language: the United States' slippage as a superpower, economic polarization in the Reagan era, rootlessness and the decline of community, difficulty in coping with domestic and foreign crises.

In this context, the organization's appeal to nationalist sentiments has been the key to success. Citrin<sup>15</sup> pointed out to a revival of Americanism when he claimed that: "for most citizens English proficiency is a resonant symbol of American nationality. Important reason for popularity of the issue is the desire to reaffirm attachment to a traditional image of Americanism which now seems vulnerable".

But, for as true as these assumptions are, they should not encourage the use of English and repressing the use of other languages. It is unacceptable for a pluralistic society as it leads to social conflict. As Macedo (D.P. MACEDO, B. DENDRINOS, AND P. GOUNARI, *The Hegemony of English*, Boulder, Paradigm, 2003, p. 38) put it, the current attacks on bilingual education, fueled by a desire of cultural hegemony and leading to attacks on multicultural education and curriculum diversity are simply unacceptable in an increasingly globalized world.

American national identity was historically founded on the assumption that whatever one's origin or native language, anyone could become an American by committing to the principles of democracy, liberty, equality, and individual achievement<sup>16</sup>. By denying bilinguals the right to speak their own language, official English advocates fail to recognize the benefits of language diversity. Edwards<sup>17</sup> has argued that nativism reflects insecurity, apprehension and regret that an old order is perceived as

changing. While it is clear that not all the members of the group are racist, nationalist sentiments contributed to expand the movement to a national scale. James Crawford<sup>18</sup> has repeatedly suggested that racist attitudes are behind English-only initiatives. But what does race have to do with language? One's language is the most obvious badge of ethnicity. U.S. English strategy was to exploit the resentment towards minorities in order to justify the legal protection of English forms<sup>19</sup>.

There was not, as there is not now, a need for English to be protected. The only reason for reaffirming the role of the national language was to limit the number of immigrants who had access to society.

As a matter of fact, if we consider the possibility of linguistic extinction in the United States, English is not currently at stake. Minority languages are.

1. M. WELCH, *The Myth of a Maverick*, New York, Palgrave Mcmillan, 2008, p. 23[↗]
2. E. SAGARIN, *Polylinguism in the United States of America: A multitude of tongues amid a monolingual majority*, Chicago, Rowman & Allanheld, 1980, p. 20[↗]
3. [↗]
4. S. B. HEATH, *Why no official tongue*, "Language loyalties: a source book on the official English controversy", 1992, pp. 20-32[↗]
5. J. CRAWFORD, *Hold your tongue: bilingualism and the politics of English-only*, New York, Longman, 1992[↗]
6. J. CRAWFORD, *Language loyalties: a source book on the official language controversy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992[↗]
7. J. CRAWFORD, *Hold your tongue*, cit., p. 145[↗]
8. [↗]
9. J. CITRIN, *The official English movement and the symbolic politics of language in the United States*, "The Western Political Quarterly", 43 (3), 1990, pp. 535-559.[↗]
10. J. CRAWFORD, *At war with diversity: U.S. language policy in an age of anxiety*, Milton Keynes, Multilingual Matters, 2000[↗]
11. The image of America as a crucible wherein the European nationalities would be transformed into a "new race" owes its origin to the title and theme of Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* (1908).[↗]
12. J. FISHMAN, *Language and ethnicity in minority sociolinguistic perspective*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters, 1989, p. 315[↗]
13. J. LEIBOWICZ, *Official English: another Americanization campaign*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 107[↗]
14. J. CRAWFORD, *Hold your tongue*, cit., and p. 2[↗]
15. J. CITRIN, *The official English movement and the symbolic politics of language in the United States*, "The Western Political Quarterly", 43 (3), 1990, p. 536.[↗]
16. J. CITRIN, *The official English movement*, cit..[↗]
17. J. EDWARDS, *Multilingualism*, London, Routledge, 1994, p.169[↗]
18. J. CRAWFORD, *Bilingual Education: history, politics, theory and practice*, Tranton, Crane Pub., 1989[↗]
19. J. CRAWFORD, *Language Loyalties: a source book on the official language controversy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 256[↗]

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