

AMERICAN LANGUAGE, POLITICS AND IDENTITY

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Abstract

At the beginning of the seventh decade of the twentieth century, a time of change in the patterns of immigration when the ethnic pride flourished remarkably, the Americans began to consider the merits of the idea of proclaiming the English language as the official language of the United States.

Examining the arguments underlying the movement for proclaiming the English language as the official language, we can conclude that a very large and surprisingly heterogeneous part of the U.S. population believe that speaking English is an important element of the American identity.

In recent years, America's ability to reconcile political unity in cultural diversity has been questioned again.

The controversy between the supporters of "language rights" and the promoters of a law meant to establish the exclusivity of the English language is based on a deeper controversy regarding the specificity of the American identity and the means for its protection. Could we assume that speaking English is a condition of full membership to the American society? Should we assume that state's support of bilingualism creates an erosion of the foundations of national unity or that such a policy promotes ethnic harmony?

Keywords: *language rights, cultural inheritance, emigration, the United States of America.*

At the beginning of the seventh decade of the twentieth century, a time of change in the patterns of immigration when the ethnic pride flourished remarkably, the Americans began to consider the merits of the idea of proclaiming the English language as the official language of the United States. Those who support the adoption of such a law argue that language diversity threatens to undermine one of the last binders of a pluralist society. Their opponents, on the other hand, state that the proclamation of the supremacy of the English language would serve as an instrument of exclusion rather than as an instrument of assimilation of ethnic minorities and that such a step is not necessary, since immigrants have always shown a great capacity to adapt¹.

Examining the arguments underlying the movement for proclaiming the English language

as the official language, we can conclude that a very large and surprisingly heterogeneous part of the U.S. population believe that speaking English is an important element of the American identity. What is necessary is a language policy to support the fundamental principles promoted by the two divergent opinions – education designed to enable all American citizens to use English in their country, coupled with the respect for other languages and traditions in the sphere of private life.

In recent years, America's ability to reconcile political unity in cultural diversity has been questioned again. A massive wave of immigrants coming from Latin America and Asia has transformed the character of many local communities and has generated many requests of establishing bilingual government services. In turn, the diversity of language has caused concerns about the national cohesion and gave birth to a movement whose aim is proclaiming the English language as the official language of the United States.

The controversy between the supporters of "language rights" and the promoters of a law meant to establish the exclusivity of the English language is based on a deeper controversy regarding the specificity of the American identity and the means for its protection. Could we assume that speaking English is a condition of full membership to the American society? Should we assume that state's support of bilingualism creates an erosion of the foundations of national unity or that such a policy promotes ethnic harmony?

Although the authors of the U.S. constitutional code eventually decided not to grant the English language a special legal rank, they assumed that the young nation was to assert a common language and that it would be English.

A confirmation of the validity of this assumption is the fact that researchers consistently find that a typical phenomenon of language manifested among immigrants is a fast shift from foreign monolingualism in the case of the first generation to bilingualism in the case of the second generation and then to English monolingualism for the third generation. During most of the nineteenth century, this phenomenon occurred in the absence of pressure from the state and despite some laws that made keeping mother tongue be relatively advantageous. The immigrants and their descendants quickly learned English not because they were forced to do so, but because English helped them raise their standard of living in America.

However, at the beginning of the twentieth century an opinion trend emerged; it supported "the exclusiveness of English" once a wave of immigrants coming from Southern and Eastern Europe provoked xenophobic sentiments. Later on, the strong anti-German sentiments caused by World War I stimulated the notion that the stability of the American values and institutions depended on the existence of cultural homogeneity. The Americanization movement that flourished at that time emphasized the need for a common language that should accelerate the assimilation of immigrants with foreign traditions; 15 of the federal states enacted laws proclaiming English as the only language of instruction in schools. In turn, the Congress established immigration quotas in 1924, which definitely had advantages for the candidates in the north-western Europe. Then, the controversies on the theme of the language disappeared from the agenda of national concerns and did not recur for almost 50 years².

The interaction of the political and demographic changes that began to occur in the '60s recreated the conflict on the language issue. Initially, black people and then other minorities placed more and more emphasis on the value of the ethnic solidarity and ethnic specificity. Thus, a political climate emerged, where state decisions came to be judged according to their potential to strengthen or weaken a minority's ethnic heritage. In this context, the activists of public organizations of citizens of Latin American origin developed the concept of language rights

as constitutional rights that ought to enjoy "equal protection by the laws". Specifically, they demanded that the government should not be satisfied with tolerating the minority languages in the private life; instead, they should actively promote bilingualism within public institutions.

Official actions to support the language minorities willing to preserve their cultural traditions accelerated the campaign for endowing the English language with a special legal status. The main catalyst consisted in bilingual education programs. Adopted in 1968, the "Bilingual Education Act" was the first significant federal step in promoting language rights. This law provided funds to meet the "special educational needs... of children with limited knowledge of English", defined as "children coming from environments where the dominant language is not English"³.

Applying this law became a subject of great controversy. Minorities' representatives tended to prefer maintaining culturally specific programs in which the children should be taught most subjects in both their native language and in English throughout the whole educational cycle. This practice repudiated the principle of the melting pot in favour of a "multicultural" concept about the American identity; this concept celebrated ethnic consciousness. The symbolic importance of this kind of diminished respect for the English language is probably the explanation of an overwhelming disapproval revealed following a national survey of public opinion conducted in 1983. The conclusion of the survey was that most people - citizens whose mother tongue was English - supported the bilingual education programs that focused on the quick acquiring of sufficient knowledge of English.

Despite this majority opinion, court orders and governmental decrees tended to favour bicultural programs or "transitional" programs with a considerable time frame. In 1974, the Supreme Court ruled that the "Civil Rights Act" of 1964 required school districts to take relevant measures to ensure participation in the education system for children who did not speak English; although the Supreme Court did not specify the measures needed to be taken, the state directives were clearly detrimental to the programs in which the English language was an auxiliary language⁴.

These regulations were fiercely opposed, especially by the influence of teachers' unions; in 1978, both at federal level and at the level of the Member States of the federation, the promotion of the official bilingualism began to be abandoned. A four-year assessment of bilingual education programs was made public in 1977-1978; it contained no convincing evidence to support the notion that such programs were likely to improve the English language skills of students and to increase their interest in learning. Instead, there was evidence that such programs led to the segregation of pupils of Latin American origin. As a result, the Congress became increasingly receptive to the campaign in support of programs designed to allow the assimilation of foreign students in schools where teaching was done in English⁵.

Together with domestic political trends, the changes in immigration set the stage for the spread of a movement that promoted the rise of the English language to the rank of "official language". In 1965, the immigration legislation was amended to abolish the system based on a national origin criterion. The new legislation also imposed a lifting of the numerical upper limit of immigration and granted preferential treatment to those who had relatives in the U.S. and applied for an immigration visa.

The results were a huge increase in the number of legal immigrants and a considerable change of percentage for certain ethnic groups and languages. The statistics of the Immigration and Naturalization Service shows that, between 1950 and 1960, about 2.5 million people legally immigrated to the United States, while later, in a single year, 1985, all legal immigrants totalled to 570,000. Between 1921 and 1960, 18% of all legal immigrants were Latin Americans and only 4% were people coming from the Asian countries. Between 1960 and 1980, these categories accounted for 40% and 35%, respectively, and over the next five years, they represented 35% and 48%, respectively. A large number of illegal immigrants who spoke Spanish and came especially from Mexico added to these figures⁶.

Besides increasing the number itself, the geographical distribution of immigrants – Asians' concentration in urban areas of California and Latin Americans' concentration in the states near the border with Mexico – increased the visibility

of foreign customs and values. However, some people also saw in this phenomenon the possibility of a territorial base for language separatism.

In 1983, warning that the failure of the effort to maintain a common language in the United States would cause unrest and polarization manifested in other countries that were divided by the language, California Senator S.I. Hayakawa greatly contributed to the establishment of the U.S. English organization, which was designed to preserve English as the national language of the United States.

One of the original goals of this organization was a constitutional amendment declaring English as the official language of the United States. Senator Hayakawa proposed this measure in 1981; other members of the Congress have taken this initiative in the future, but their effort has not paid off so far.

The failure of this action prompted the U.S. English organization to focus its efforts at a state level and a local level. Basically thanks to its actions, 44 states and numerous counties and municipalities took into consideration the adoption of laws or launching initiatives to establish rank English as "official" language between 1981 and 1991. The legislative bodies in Arkansas, North Carolina, South Carolina, North Dakota, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi and Tennessee also adopted legislative measures, and Virginia added an amendment to a previous statement in order to counter the movement towards bilingual education. Yet, in 34 states, the legislators refused to pass the laws that proclaimed English as the official language. In four of these states (California, Arizona, Colorado and Florida), the constitutional state codes subsequently included amendments on the English language; these amendments were adopted by public vote⁷.

The promoters of the legislative measures claim that both historical experience and logic tell us that language diversity threatens social cohesion and political stability. They argue that previous generations of immigrants realized that learning English was the means for their social integration and material progress; so, if English lost its position as America's common language, the result would undermine one of the last binders of a pluralist society. They separate

themselves from any hostile attitude towards minorities, and indeed, many of the protagonists of the movement are descendants of immigrant families.

The opponents of the measures that were meant to place English on the official position consider them as instruments of inclusion rather than of exclusion. The Constitutional establishment of the superior rank of English, they say, implies that language minorities are inferior and undesirable in America. They also argue that the predominant use of English is not threatened and they quote studies with conclusions stating that almost all immigrants want to learn English and do so despite the fact that, for adults, the offer of educational services in this regard is inadequate. So, those who criticize the current campaign promoting the proclamation of English as the official language of the United States believe it to be useless in the best case and a superficial and disguised manifestation of racism and xenophobia in the worst case.

It would be likely that the actions aiming at declaring the English language as the official language should be successful in countries where Latin American and Asian populations is numerous, where the appearance of resentment among people who speak English is probable. In reality, if we consider only the results of the legislative bodies' debates, the truth seems to be diametrically opposed to this assumption. The laws declaring English as the official language were especially adopted by southern states with mostly Anglo-Saxon population and where the foreign-born residents, Latin Americans and Asians, represent a tiny percentage. In these circumstances, the language used is an indisputable matter, the bilingualism is not a current problem and proclaiming English the official language is an uncontroversial decision.

Yet, it should be noted that the opposition of state officials does not always seal the fate of actions for declaring English as the official language. A relevant fact in this regard is that the four countries where the population forced their legislators by voting to adopt constitutional amendments which should set the official position of English have the highest proportion of people who do not speak English, immigrants, Latin Americans and Asians.

Thus, locally or regionally, the English language is the subject of heated controversy when immigration changes the predominant pattern of the use of language. In this context, the leaders of both major political parties decided to avoid modifying the existing policy language. But where the followers proclaimed English as the official language, they were sufficiently well organized to be able to impose a settlement by means of public vote and they recorded clear victory.

In 1986, California's voters voted in support of "Proposition 63", a constitutional amendment of the code of the State of California. The stated goal of the initiative was to "preserve, protect and strengthen the English language, the common language of the people of the United States"⁸.

Most of California's leading politicians opposed "Proposition 63". State Governor George Deukmejian, found it "unnecessary" and warned that it could cause "fear, confusion and anger among... California minorities". The Roman catholic bishops of the state also urged people to reject the initiative and stated that such an amendment "would enthrone bias in the law and endanger all forms of bilingual assistance". An impressive alliance of groups with specific interests, which included the League of Women Voters organization, the local chambers of commerce, the Californian branch of the AFL-CIO trade union, the American Civil Liberties Union association and numerous ethnic minority organizations, issued echoes of these charges just like the editorial articles published in the newspapers of wide circulation in California.

However, on the day of the vote, those who were in favour of the proclamation of English as the official language represented 73% of the electorate; they were also an absolute majority in all the counties of the state. A survey conducted among voters stated that the amendment had the support of almost all segments of the electorate in California⁹. Of course, voters of Latin American and Asian origin were not as willing to approve the amendment as those who were of black or white European origin, but in the case of these two last categories, the support was almost equally big. The economic concerns did not appear to have a significant role; as for

the support for "Proposition 63", there was no difference between those who stated that their financial situation was better than it had been the year before and the people who said that their financial situation had worsened.

Party policy and ideology were factors that damaged to some extent the general consensus on the desirability of declaring English as the official language – the conservatives tended to endorse the proposal more than the liberals. It seems that the differences of opinion on language issues result in a greater degree from differences in attitudes towards social issues than from differences in material situation.

The campaigns for establishing the official position of English which were held in 1988 in the states of Arizona, Colorado and Florida generated very similar reactions to those that characterized the campaign conducted in California two years earlier. Again, state official leaders of both major political parties and the prominent figures in other areas opposed the legislative measure, saying that it was not necessary, that it was a racist, that it could cause scission and could harm the necessary bilingual services. And, again, voters were for the adoption of the amendment¹⁰. (However, in February 1990, a federal court district judge ruled that the amendment passed in Arizona, which was the most restrictive, constituted a violation of the constitutional provisions on the freedom of speech, which was a right guaranteed at the federal level).

The economic competition and cultural resentments are the main explanations offered by social scientists regarding the conflicts of language. Both theories characterize the desire to raise the rank of English as a hostile, defensive reaction, caused by feelings of vulnerability in the context of ethnic competition in employment, education or housing, in the context of manifestations of resentment on the cost of public services that mainly benefit minority languages, in the context of unfavourable personal experience for ethnic minorities, in the context of a sense of insecurity regarding America's share in the world or simply in the context of prejudice existence.

The support for the campaigns for raising the rank of English is so great that the economic fears

and prejudices concerning minorities are not the only – or even the main – explanations. In truth, the majority of respondents in a poll conducted in California in 1987, after the adoption of the amendment, stated that it was "good" for immigrants to keep their native languages and cultural traditions in general. In another survey, conducted in California next year, only 18% of the Anglo-Saxon origin people who had been questioned stated that they were "very concerned" by the possibility that the increased number of Latin Americans and Asians should cause difficulty of maintaining the "American way of life"; only 13% stated that this change harmed themselves or their families. During a survey conducted in 1986 by the CBS television network in collaboration with The New York Times, 68% of the respondents said that "today's new immigrants" would be welcome in their neighbourhood, while only 15% feared that the presence of new immigrants could mean job losses for them¹¹. In conclusion, we can say that most people do not seem to fear too much the effect of immigration on their material situation and that in America there is not a widespread hostility towards minority languages and their cultural specificity.

The results of public opinion polls suggest another explanation to the prevailing position towards the policy on the issue of language – most Americans' perception on national identity includes the notion that being American is equivalent to speaking English. The survey conducted in California in 1988 led to the following result: 76% of the respondents, including 65% of those with higher education and more than two thirds of all Latin Americans and Asians, believed that the ability "to speak and write in English" played a "very important" role in the definition of "real American"¹².

However, an even more significant aspect is the fact that 75% of the respondents felt that the participation in elections was another important criterion in defining the "true American", and 62% stated that the only people who spoke and read in English ought to be granted the right to vote. During a survey conducted nationally by the Roper Centre in 1986, 81% of the respondents agreed that "everyone who wants to live in our country should be required to learn English",

and in a similar survey conducted afterwards by the CBS network and The New York Times, two thirds of the respondents believed that English was already the official language of the United States¹³. In this climate, a vote in favour of the proclamation of English as the official language could be seen as an expression – sometimes based on the self-consciousness of the individual, sometimes reflective – of the identification to a symbol of nationality.

An important cause of the success of the “official English” at voting is that the promoters of legislative measures managed to display it as a manifestation of patriotism rather than of intolerance. The controversies woven on bilingualism and the proclamation of English as the official language reflects a cultural conflict regarding the definition of the American identity. The majority of the U.S. population believes that becoming American means speaking English; in the mind of these people learning English plays an important role in the process by which immigrants become full citizens of the country thanks to their own efforts towards assimilation. Many Americans see “English as the official language” as a synonym of the common nationality. On the other hand, opposed to the special rank of the English language, the bilingualism becomes a symbol of division and separatism. In this atmosphere, it is difficult to develop a language policy that should be fully legitimate.

For the authors of the state policy, the starting point should be the overwhelming evidence supporting the claim that the people who have recently arrived in America have always tried to learn English and that most of them have reached their goal within a generation. The bilingual education programs that accelerate this process increase the economic opportunities available to immigrants and accelerate their integration into the political community under conditions that almost everyone accepts. The goals in the area of language policy should facilitate the access to the country’s public language – English – and stimulate tolerance of other languages in the private life. Once bilingualism becomes a practical complement of the prevailing image of the American identity, rather than a principled challenge for it, the impulses for the campaign proclaiming English as the official language will diminish.

The following principles can provide a framework for a policy in the sphere of language designed to promote social harmony rather than win a war of symbols:

The efforts for the adoption of legislative measures to give the English language an official position must be abandoned. The instrumental consequences of such legislation adopted at a regional or local level are almost non-existent, and, in the absence of a genuine current position of English, the official subordination of other languages does not have much effect except that it causes scission.

The existence of a common language yet contributes to strengthening the national identity. The purpose of bilingual education programs applied in public schools must be learning English faster and more effectively. Given that the common language of scientists and economists around the world is English, improving the language skills of all Americans is a national priority. For any student, the bilingual education should be a transitional stage¹⁴. Preserving the ethnic identity, however desirable it may be, must be limited to private life.

The English classes for adult immigrants are not appropriate. Expanding and improving such teaching efforts is imperative for the social and economic integration of language minorities. Only if these programs are effective and readily available will it be reasonable to insist that possessing adequate knowledge of English is a prerequisite for obtaining citizenship.

It is necessary that these programs be partly funded from federal funds. The flow of language minorities is largely the result of federal policy measures – reforms of the law on immigration, refugee policy etc. On the other hand, the effects of immigration fall especially within the competence of local institutions and officials who have to deal with requests for housing, education, employment and state welfare and have to counter the tensions generated by the juxtaposition of different cultural traditions. The federal funds are a way of solving these conflicts.

The concept of the melting pot should be revitalized. In a society whose population constantly absorbs immigrants belonging to different cultures, instilling a unifying civic identity is a constant issue. The melting pot

– the process of cultural assimilation that makes America a nation which has the same meaning – continues to be an attractive solution. The melting pot spirit is universalistic and inclusive; it produces individuals who are Americans by virtue of their commitment to a national democratic creed.

In the late '60s, the flourishing of the ethnic consciousness resulted in attacks against this view and promoted a version of “multicultural” American nationality¹⁵. If multiculturalism does not denote more than voluntarily maintaining the awareness of the contributions made by ethnic category to the national history, it is easily compatible with the traditions of the American culture. However, if it promotes the idea that there must not be a unique American identity but several distinct identities in a cultural sense and whose preservation requires intervention from the state, multiculturalism involves a foreign concept according to which the nation is not a community of individuals with equal rights but a confederation of ethnic communities. The political measures capable of benefiting ethnic minorities receive a broad popular consent only if they are developed in a way that does not deny but supports the prevailing conception regarding the American identity.

If the current trends manifested in the ethnic composition of the American society continue, the controversy on the language issues will remain in the political agenda. The existence of harmony in diversity requires a consensus between customs and values. The United States cannot be Switzerland or the Austria-Hungary Empire or even Canada. The destiny of the American nation is a revitalized melting pot in which all elements – of native and foreign origin, belonging to the majority or to the minority – are interrelated and produce a new identity for all the citizens of this country. This process also involves letting go; experience suggests that language is an aspect of the cultural heritage of immigrants which is to be neglected.

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