

## Does the United States Need a Language Policy?

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Some nations include a language policy in their constitution. For example, France declared French as its official language in amending its constitution before it joined the European Community in 1992, and many Arab countries combine a statement about Arabic as their national language alongside their proclamation of Islam as their official religion. More than half of national constitutions include one or more language clauses establishing national or official languages (Jones, 2001). Sixty-three countries name one official language; in addition, there are seven former Soviet republics that establish a single state language and another eight states with one official language and one or more national languages.

Other countries have established language laws outside of their constitutions. For example, New Zealand, where English is dominant, has laws making Maori and New Zealand Sign Language official languages along with English. Israel maintains Hebrew and Arabic as the only official languages. Mexico has a law requiring public announcements to be in correct Spanish. The Netherlands requires Dutch for administration but grants some limited functions to Friesian. Norway (whose constitution is written in Danish) requires official documents to be in two varieties of Norwegian: Bokmål and Nynorsk. Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory, has a law making English and Spanish official (Leclerc, 1994).

### History of Language Policies, Laws, and Attitudes in the United States

The U.S. Constitution says nothing about language (though it asserts freedom of speech in the First

Amendment). During and after the war of independence, the issue of a national language did come up but was left without any formal decision. Independence from British rule did not lead to seeking a new national language, although there were later moves to mark formally the distinctions of an American language, like the spellings that Noah Webster proposed (Weinstein, 1982). Marshall (1986, p. 11) has no doubt: "The Founding Fathers of our country did not choose to have an official language precisely because they felt language to be a matter of individual choice." Recent efforts by U.S. English to make English the official language have so far been firmly resisted, so their efforts have been redirected to resolutions of city governments and state legislatures.

U.S. language policy has to be sought beyond the Constitution. During the First World War, xenophobic feelings bolstered by war-induced nationalism focused not just on learning English but also, driven by anti-German sentiment, on discarding allegiances other than to the United States. German books were removed from libraries, German theatres were closed, German music was banned, and the teaching of German stopped in schools (Pavlenko, 2002). Thirty states passed laws obliging foreign-born residents who could not speak English to attend evening schools, and thirty-four states made English the only language of instruction in public schools. By the end of the period, earlier positive attitudes toward bilingualism had been replaced by a widespread belief that it had little to contribute and that the teaching of foreign

languages in school was a bad thing. Bilingualism became associated with inferior intelligence and lack of patriotism. Pavlenko believes that by the 1930s, American ideology was firmly monolingual.

But there were exceptions. Even before the 1964 Civil Rights Act, U.S. courts had on a number of occasions defended the rights of speakers of languages other than English. In 1923, the Supreme Court ruled in *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923) that while the states could require English as the medium of instruction in tax-supported schools, they could not do this for private schools. In 1926, when the Philippines were still a U.S. territory, the U.S. Supreme Court found that a Philippine Bookkeeping Act that prohibited the keeping of accounts in languages other than English, Spanish, or Philippine dialects violated the Philippine Bill of Rights, which Congress had patterned after the U.S. Constitution.

In 1958, in response to the launch of the Soviet *Sputnik* satellites, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which provided encouragement and financial support for the teaching of Russian and Chinese and other critical languages (Urban, 2010). During the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Congress provided funding for bilingual education programs that would teach immigrant pupils in their home language while they were learning the English that all agreed they needed in order to enjoy citizenship. In a comment that attests to his years of experience as an H.M. (Her Majesty's) Inspector of Schools in England and Wales, E. G. Lewis (1980, p. 369) remarks that "Policy is decided and determined by those who, reluctantly or willingly, are prepared to pay for it." This is what made the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 such a significant decision in the history of U.S. language management. For 34 years, this law provided funding for educational programs that taught students in languages other than English.

### **Current Status of Language Policies, Laws, and Activities in the United States**

The Bilingual Education Act expired on January 8, 2002, dying a quiet death. (See Crawford, 2002,

for an obituary of the law.) Similar state programs have been under attack from English-only activists (Brauer, 2006). In addition, U.S. education is slowly ending or downgrading its few foreign language programs: Many universities and colleges no longer require a foreign language, and elementary and secondary schools have moved their efforts to preparing students for standardized tests in English and mathematics as a result of the 2002 federal education law, No Child Left Behind. The law's accountability measures, which focus exclusively on English and mathematics, have led many schools to drop foreign language classes and other nontested subjects. Rhodes and Pufahl (2010) report that the teaching of French, German, Japanese, and Russian decreased at the elementary and secondary level between 1997 and 2008, and a third of the schools they surveyed that had foreign language programs reported that they had been negatively affected by No Child Left Behind.

One exception to the decrease in foreign language instruction involves the defense and intelligence establishment. Just as during the first years of World War II the Army was persuaded to start programs to teach languages to recruits who would be sent overseas (Angiolillo, 1947; Spolsky, 1995), so in the years since 9/11 the defense and intelligence communities have seen fit to undertake major efforts to make sure that the United States will no longer have just one Pashto speaker working for the National Security Agency and none for the CIA when it wants to know what is happening in Afghanistan (Powers, 2002), and that soldier interpreters will be available when forces are sent overseas. The goals of the Defense Language Transformation Roadmap (U.S. Department of Defense, 2005), developed to meet the need for greatly increased language capacity in the defense community, are ambitious: language policy officers at all levels, competence in foreign languages for all officers, the strengthening of the Defense Language Institute as the major U.S. language teaching institution. These defense-related activities are needed to make up for the lack of foreign language instruction in the educational establishment. These activities even include the

establishment of model K–16 language programs that take heritage speakers of Chinese and Arabic to high levels of language competence while they are developing professional skills in science, engineering, and other fields (Spolsky, 2001).

These activities are of course open to criticism—for example, that we are teaching foreign languages so that we can defend ourselves or invade other nations, or that we are emphasizing practical skill and missing out on the cultural values that come from a humanities approach that would open our students to other rich literatures and knowledge (Parker, 1961). We also are continuing to treat foreignness as inimical and foreign languages as enemy territory, even when they are the heritage cultures of our own immigrants.

## The Role of English

This limited perspective on languages is not restricted to the United States. In many national educational systems, the teaching of English dominates and has replaced instruction in other languages (Lambert, 2006). The European Community has an official policy calling for schools to teach two foreign languages, intending that English will not be the only one, but with all their efforts, they find that this policy is seldom implemented with any energy. In Europe, over half claim they speak a language other than their mother tongue. For most, this language is English. The motivation is obvious: Grin (2001) has shown that in Switzerland, a person with skills in English earns up to 30% more than someone with matched qualifications apart from English. So it is understandable that three quarters want their children to learn English for the increased job opportunities it provides.

In Asian and African nations, English similarly dominates and drowns out calls for teaching other useful and valuable languages. In much of the world, speakers of endangered languages are moving through a two-step process, first to drop their own heritage language for the locally dominant official language and then to add English, which they believe will give them access to better jobs and economic opportunities.

English of course dominates in the United States as well, even in immigrant communities. Research shows that within two or three generations, most non-English-speaking immigrants to the United States will have lost or almost lost their heritage languages. Ironically, while the number of residents speaking a language other than English at home is rising, the shift to English is proceeding even faster. The causes of this language loss are complex. Most researchers see the major reasons as related to the power and international status of English in the media and the economy.

## The Need for Language Policies in the United States

In setting out the nature of U.S. national security needs for languages and international expertise, Brecht and Rivers (2000) cite the 1988 amendment to Title VI of the Higher Education Act:

The security, stability, and economic vitality of the United States in a complex, global era depends upon American experts in and citizens knowledgeable about world regions, foreign languages and international affairs, as well as upon a strong research base in the areas.

Brecht and Rivers (2000) also provide a long list of countries and the language knowledge that offers access to each country and its culture. Such a huge task cannot be dealt with by the kind of programs developed during World War II to teach language to soldiers. Existing government language programs such as those offered by the Defense Language Institute and the Foreign Service Institute meet a small portion of the need, inadequate both in numbers and proficiency. (It has only recently been realized that overseas postings require level 4 rather than level 3 proficiency, although the latter is the highest level aimed at in most programs.)

Fluent speakers could be produced much more effectively through enriched heritage language programs. The capacity available has been suggested: “Census statistics for the year 1999 indicate that 10% of the American population, a total of

25,831,000 people, was foreign-born. This is the largest number of foreign-born residents in U.S. history” (UCLA Steering Committee, 2000). Brecht and Ingold (1998) are more specific: “More than 150 languages other than English are used in this country.” But most of this capability is currently wasted. Wiley (2007, p. 79) argues that a language policy “based on the current and historical reality of multilingualism in this country” could be valuable. But the dominant status of English, together with the power of overt and covert policies supporting English only, leads to a dramatic loss of heritage language knowledge in the United States (UCLA Steering Committee, 2000). What kind of language policy could reverse this loss? Fishman (2001) showed how difficult is the task for individual languages. A monolingual English-only hegemony seems to dominate American society. However, the General Social Survey (Robinson, Brecht, & Rivers, 2006; Robinson, Rivers, & Brecht, 2006) suggested that while Americans believed that English should be their official language, three quarters agreed that children should learn other languages in high school, 65% that foreign languages are as important as learning math and science, and 67% that English is not threatened by languages spoken by immigrants. Thus, there may well be an ideological base for the encouragement of heritage languages, even though it is not revealed in current political support for foreign language instruction, as seen in the general exclusion of languages from both Republican and Democrat education planning.

## The Model of Europe

How might we change this damaging neglect? Europe offers one model of multilingualism. What is critically different from the United States is the high proportion of people with multilingual skills. As mentioned earlier, more than half of Europeans claim to speak more than one language, and three quarters want their children to learn English. Given this, it is no wonder that the Council of Europe was able a quarter of a century ago to start building its major program for encouraging foreign language learning that has now culminated in the Common

Framework (Council of Europe, 2001), which provides a common basis for the development of language syllabi, curriculum guidelines, exams, textbooks, and so forth across Europe.

Three points are relevant about the situation in Europe: Much of the effort has gone into developing a *second* foreign language, with English so well entrenched as the first. Second, the Council of Europe programs focused on foreign language teaching for native speakers of a country’s official language; they left the urgent issues of immigrants and minority language speakers to others. And third, the Council is now in its declining days, without funds, and it is too early to be sure that the European Union will carry on these basic programs.

But the European Union did tackle a second side of language policy: the concern for minority heritage languages. This followed from its interests in human rights, an ideal mechanism to let a European supranational organization involve itself in the affairs of its members. The programs have been modest, and the decisions on what constitutes a European minority language were made with a great deal of sensitivity to national concerns (e.g., Romany, the language of the Roma—formerly known as Gypsies—gains little; Occitan, a regional language spoken in the south of France, is not named at all). But human rights did play a major role in supporting moves for the official recognition of heritage languages and the reversal of language shift activities to prevent the loss of endangered languages. The improving status of Basque, Catalan, Welsh, Breton, Friesian, and some other languages is an important result of these efforts. However, even as the European Union takes over Council of Europe foreign language interests, there is no evidence that they see the connections between the three different kinds of language programs: foreign languages, heritage languages, and immigrant languages.

The only amalgam of these three ultimately related issues was in the temporarily successful alliance that Joe Lo Bianco formed that led to the establishment of Language Australia (Lo Bianco, 1987), a progressive multilingual policy unfortunately replaced after

a few years by a program emphasizing English and later by a call for teaching Pacific languages like Chinese and Indonesian (Lo Bianco & Wickert, 2001). Elsewhere, the interests of these three areas are perceived as competing, and the mutual advantages of joining in a single policy are ignored.

## Principles for U.S. Language Policy

What is needed is to bring together the issues of foreign, heritage, and immigrant languages and start to build a unified policy that will include heritage languages, national security, and the traditional values of learning other languages and cultures. Basic to a U.S. language policy must be a number of principles. The first is the development of policies to ensure that there is no linguistic discrimination—that languages and speakers of specific languages are not ignored in the provision of civic services. As Wiley (2007) suggests, immigrant language policies need provision for both “protective rights” from discrimination as well as “rights of access” to instruction. The second principle is the provision of adequate programs for teaching English to all, native-born or immigrant, old or young. The third is the development of respect both for multilingual capacity, the cognitive advantages of which have been shown (Bialystok, 2001), and for diverse individual languages. Arising out of this will be approaches that enhance the status and enrich the knowledge of heritage and community languages. Fourth will be a multi-branched language capacity program that

- strengthens and integrates a variety of language education programs,
- connects heritage programs with advanced training programs,
- builds on heritage and immersion and overseas-experience approaches to constantly replenish a cadre of efficient multilingual citizens capable of professional work using their multilingual skills, and
- provides rich and satisfying language instruction that leads to a multilingual population with

knowledge of and respect for other languages and cultures.

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