

1 Language diversity in the USA

Dispelling common myths and appreciating advantages

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The official language of the US is English. But today’s immigrants are not learning English as quickly as those of the past – it seems like they don’t want to fit in to the American way of life. Language diversity in this country is a recent problem due to unprecedented levels of immigration, and we are at risk that the different languages spoken here threaten our national unity.

These myths regarding language are fairly prevalent in the USA at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Yet all of them are false, and both their underlying premises and their implications are damaging on several levels. They are damaging to intergroup relations because immigrants are accused of lacking the motivation or desire to integrate into mainstream US society and learn English. This often leads others to resent them or accuse them of being unpatriotic. They are damaging to immigrant families in that children who come to school speaking a Language Other than English (often referred to as “LOTEs”) are pressured into erasing that language, which can lead to academic difficulties as well as problems communicating with family members and retaining cultural traditions. They are also damaging to the nation because they squander vast linguistic resources that could benefit the USA economically, diplomatically, and culturally. This introductory chapter will explore each of these topics as it addresses these three common fallacies.

Isn’t English the official language of the USA?

As of the year 2009, the USA does not have an official language. While the great majority of Americans today (80 percent) speak English as a native language – and, in fact, as their only language – there is no law or constitutional amendment establishing a national language. As noted by Heath (1977), the founding fathers:

recognized that decisions on language choice and change would be made at the local and regional levels by citizens responding to communicative needs and goals they themselves identified. Moreover, early political leaders recognized the close connection between

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language and religious/cultural freedoms, and they preferred to refrain from proposing legislation which might be construed as a restriction of these freedoms. (Heath 1977: 270)

According to Schiffman, the USA has no explicit language policy, but we do have a “linguistic culture” that “supports the use of English to the exclusion of almost all other languages, so that an explicit policy that would officialize English is not necessary, and probably never will be” (Schiffman 2005: 121). The development of our national “linguistic culture” will be further explored in this chapter.

The top twelve LOTEs spoken in the US by people aged five and older, as reported in the 2007 American Community Survey, are displayed in Table 1.1. What is immediately noticeable in this table is that almost two thirds of all US LOTE speakers (62 percent) are Spanish-speaking, even though Spanish-speakers make up just 12 percent of the nation’s population. In addition, while groups such as French, German, Italian, and Polish speakers have undergone a numerical decline, groups like Russian and Vietnamese experienced tremendous growth during the decade between 1990 and 2000, as well as continuing growth from 2000 to 2007. The ramifications for these trends will be discussed throughout this book.

Table 1.1. *Top twelve non-English languages in the USA*

| Ranking | Number of speakers | Percentage of the population | Percentage change 1990–2000 | Percentage change 2000–7 | Percentage of all US LOTE speakers |
|----------------|--------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| English-only | 225,505,953 | 80.27 | +8 | +5 | n/a |
| 1. Spanish | 34,547,077 | 12.30 | +62 | +23 | 62.31 |
| 2. Chinese | 2,464,572 | 0.88 | +53 | +22 | 4.45 |
| 3. Tagalog* | 1,480,429 | 0.53 | +45 | +21 | 2.67 |
| 4. French | 1,355,805 | 0.48 | –3 | –18 | 2.45 |
| 5. Vietnamese | 1,207,004 | 0.43 | +99 | +20 | 2.18 |
| 6. German | 1,104,354 | 0.39 | –11 | –20 | 1.99 |
| 7. Korean | 1,062,337 | 0.38 | +43 | +19 | 1.92 |
| 8. Russian | 851,174 | 0.30 | +191 | +20 | 1.54 |
| 9. Italian | 798,801 | 0.28 | –23 | –21 | 1.44 |
| 10. Arabic | 767,319 | 0.27 | +73 | +25 | 1.38 |
| 11. Portuguese | 687,126 | 0.24 | +31 | +22 | 1.24 |
| 12. Polish | 638,059 | 0.23 | –8 | –4 | 1.15 |

Note: * Although some prefer the term “Filipino,” the term “Tagalog” is used in the USA Census.
Source: USA Census Bureau 2000a, 2007c.

Some of the most significant implications are for the educational field in the USA – both the field concerned with the education of English language

Table 1.2. *Immigrants who speak English “very well” or “well”*

| Ranking | Number of speakers | Percentage who speak English “well” or “very well” |
|----------------|--------------------|--|
| 1. Spanish | 34,547,077 | 70.9 |
| 2. Chinese | 2,464,572 | 73.4 |
| 3. Tagalog | 1,480,429 | 93.0 |
| 4. French | 1,355,805 | 92.3 |
| 5. Vietnamese | 1,207,004 | 68.6 |
| 6. German | 1,104,354 | 95.2 |
| 7. Korean | 1,062,337 | 71.2 |
| 8. Russian | 851,174 | 74.6 |
| 9. Italian | 798,801 | 88.9 |
| 10. Arabic | 767,319 | 88.5 |
| 11. Portuguese | 687,126 | 77.8 |
| 12. Polish | 638,059 | 80.4 |

Source: US Census Bureau 2007c.

learners as well as the field of foreign language education. It is crucial to note that, in 2002, fully 20 percent of all school-aged children spoke a language other than English at home, a figure which has more than doubled since 1979 (National Center for Educational Statistics 2002a). The field concerned with helping children learn English as well as their school subjects – often referred to as “bilingual education” or “English as a Second Language (ESL),” is clearly affected by these changes. They must find instructors capable of helping these children learn, which requires training in ESL methodology and, ideally, proficiency in the children’s first languages. Typically, when these students get to high school and college, they come into contact with the field of foreign language education, which refers to them as “heritage speakers” of the non-English language. Heritage speakers are different from traditional foreign language learners in many ways (Valdés 2001; Potowski and Carreira 2004), so foreign language educators must accommodate instructional materials and methodologies for these increasing numbers of heritage-speaking students. Each chapter in this book will examine educational implications of language diversity in the USA.

Why don’t they just learn English?

The fact is that US immigrants and their descendants *do* learn English, and they learn it quickly. Table 1.2 shows that, overall, speakers of other languages report speaking English “well” or “very well.” This is the pattern for most immigrants to this country in the past as well as today. Plentiful research has shown that

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immigrant communities shift entirely to English very quickly, typically within three generations. In fact, when examining thirty-five different nations in the world, in no other country was the rate of mother-tongue shift toward monolingualism in the national dominant language as fast as in the USA (Lieberson *et al.* 1975). Even the most recently arrived groups exhibit patterns of language use that suggest that the adoption of English is well underway (McKay and Wong 2000: 81). Veltman (2000), for example, found that after up to five years in the US, 20 percent of immigrants aged 0–14 at the time of arrival had already adopted English as their preferred, usual language. After five additional years, the number rose to 40 percent. In addition, Veltman found that younger people today are more likely to adopt English than their older peers were when they were young. This is the trend all over the USA and is likely due to urbanization, universal education, mass communication, and greater regional integration into the national economy.

The studies just cited show that immigrants shift very quickly to English. We now turn to the maintenance of heritage languages among their US-born descendants. It is very common for the grandchildren of immigrants not to develop strong proficiency in their family's non-English language. In 2006, Rumbaut, Massey, and Bean found that the "life expectancy" of five languages in southern California (Spanish, Tagalog, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean) was no more than two generations. That is, Spanish can be expected to begin to die out with the children of immigrants, and not be spoken well or at all by the grandchildren of immigrants – and the Asian languages die out even faster, often not being spoken well by the children of immigrants. These authors tell us that their findings constitute support for the idea of the USA as a "linguistic graveyard" (p. 458). With immigration constituting 65 percent of the total US population growth and virtually 100 percent of its labor force growth in 2000 (Passel 2007), it is in our best interest that these individuals be well educated; this volume argues that this education should include, in addition to English, literacy and communicative skills in the home language.

It is worth mentioning that immigrants abandon their heritage languages for a variety of reasons that will be explored throughout this book, including peer pressure, lack of opportunity to use the language, or fear that it will interfere with their ability to learn English or get ahead in American society. As noted by Tse (2001a: 33), "[w]hereas knowing English may bring prestige and acceptance, speaking another language – especially a low-status language – can do the opposite" by causing shame for being different or attracting xenophobic reactions in others. Even so, loss of the heritage language can sometimes have serious negative consequences. It can create feelings of linguistic insecurity (Krashen 1998) and identity loss (Fought 2006); Zhou and Bankston (2000a) argue that loss of heritage language and identity leads some students to engage in delinquent behavior at school in the quest for a new identity. Particularly

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devastating is the weakening of the family, as parental authority is often diminished when parents and children cannot communicate with each other, and elders can no longer transmit family and ethnic values (Rodriguez 1981; Wong-Fillmore 1991; Tse 2001a: 52).

In spite of abundant evidence of rapid acquisition of English, it is today's large numbers of new immigrants that may create the impression of a lack of linguistic assimilation. In his 2004 book titled *Who are We?*, Harvard professor Samuel Huntington expresses concern about the collapse of the US national identity due in part to the persistence of Spanish among Mexican immigrants. "There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society," writes Huntington, and "Mexican-Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English." However, Huntington would need look no further than the second generation of Mexicans in the USA, who are typically English-dominant, and the third generation, who are monolingual in English, to see that these concerns are largely unfounded. One recent development that has disturbed the migration pattern of some Mexican nationals, however, may in fact contribute to Huntington's alarm. Typically, families would make a few trips to the USA lasting several months to a year to earn money, and then return permanently to Mexico. But as border security has tightened, it has become more dangerous and expensive to make these trips, so many have settled in the USA "reluctantly, with little interest in identifying as Americans" (Kotlovitz 2007). Yet given that the majority (60 percent) of US Latinos are born in the USA and grow up to become either English dominant or English monolingual (Rumbaut *et al.* 2006), there is no strong evidence supporting Huntington's argument.

Fears about immigrants not learning English are often accompanied by what we might call the "my grandparent" myth. It goes something like this: "When my grandparents immigrated from [name of country], they did not need bilingual education or special services in their language. They simply worked hard and learned the language. Today's immigrants want everything handed to them." What this sentiment ignores, however, is that life in the 1800s and early 1900s required very little knowledge of English to make a decent wage in the areas of manufacturing where many immigrants worked. High levels of literacy, or even a high school diploma, were not necessary as they are today. It is very likely that this person's grandparents would be at a much greater disadvantage in the twenty-first century as immigrants to the USA without English abilities.

Finally, although this volume does not address English learning in depth, an important factor in the US language equation is the acute lack of accessible and well-taught English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in many communities. In some cases, when ESL classes are available, some individuals cannot take advantage of them due to scheduling problems involved with holding more than one job – which can entail working 16 hours per day – or problems

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with transportation or childcare. But the biggest problem seems to be lack of availability of affordable ESL classes. A 2006 study found that 60 percent of the free ESL programs in twelve states had waiting lists, ranging from a few months in Colorado and Nevada to as long as two years in New Mexico and Massachusetts (Tucker 2006). In 2005 there were 1.2 million adults enrolled in ESL courses, which is about one in ten of those who reported speaking English “Less than very well” or “Not at all” (US Department of Education 2005). The federal government provides money for such classes, but each state decides how much of these funds to spend on ESL classes. According to Santos (2007a), advocates for more English classes argue that this state–federal financing split leaves a system whose quality varies widely from state to state, and is lacking almost everywhere. Rather than blame the victims of these shortages, Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, where the immigrant population has tripled since 1990, sponsored a bill in 2006 that would have given legal immigrants \$500 vouchers to pay for English classes since so many of the free ones were full. He stated that “Most education policy is the prerogative of state and local governments, but I would argue that the prerogative to help people learn our common language is a federal responsibility” and that “If we make it easier for people to learn English, they will learn it. I think that ought to be a priority of our government, and I don’t think it has been” (Santos 2007a).

Senator Alexander’s position of helping immigrants attend ESL classes stands in contrast to the idea that laws forbidding the use of non-English languages will somehow promote greater English learning. Some monolingual English-speaking Americans are intolerant of languages other than English spoken in the USA and seek to promote its acquisition through legislative means. In 2007, there were three bills proposed to make English the official language of the USA (S133, HR 769, and HR 997).² Although all three were referred to subcommittees but never came up for a vote, this clearly demonstrates that numerous lawmakers and their constituents, much like the large lobbying groups English-only and US English, feel a need to officially protect and promote English. As of 2007, twenty-six states had declared English their official language, while only three states had any kind of protected bilingualism (Hawaii, Louisiana, and New Mexico).³ And although Native American languages are official or co-official on many reservations, language loss among Native American communities has been systematic, as is described in Chapter 3 in this volume.

In fact, such laws do very little to assist immigrants in acquiring English skills. According to the Institute for Language and Education Policy (Crawford 2006), “official English” policies are:

- (1) Unnecessary – the overwhelming dominance of English in the USA is not threatened in any way. Newcomers to this country are learning it more rapidly than ever before. Our language does not need “legal protection.”

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- (2) Punitive – restricting government’s ability to communicate in other languages would threaten the rights and welfare of millions of people, including many US citizens, who are not fully proficient in English.
- (3) Pointless – Official-English legislation offers no practical assistance to anyone trying to learn English. In fact, it is likely to frustrate that goal by outlawing programs designed to bring immigrants into the mainstream of our society.
- (4) Divisive – the campaign to declare English the official language often serves as a proxy for hostility toward minority groups, Latinos and Asians in particular. It is exacerbating ethnic tensions in a growing number of communities.
- (5) Inconsistent with American values – Official-English laws have been declared unconstitutional in state and federal courts because they violate guarantees of freedom of speech and equal protection of the laws.
- (6) Self-defeating – English-only policies are foolish in an era of globalization, when multilingual skills are essential to economic prosperity and national security. Language resources should be conserved and developed, not suppressed.

Far from simply seeking to promote English proficiency, ulterior motives for such laws might lie elsewhere. Urcioli (2001), for example, argues that race has been remapped from biology onto language. In past discourses on race, it was posited that there were inherently superior and inferior races, each with intellectual traits attributed to them. Such arguments have become less acceptable in public discourse, but language is seen as fair game, allowing it in many cases to become a proxy for discrimination. Unlike biological race, however, most people think that individuals can and should control their language; if they do not, it is considered acceptable for them to suffer the economic consequences. Urcioli contends that what drives movements like the English Language Amendment is precisely such mapping of race onto language. Race ideology emphasized the importance of compartmentalization such that the inferior would not contaminate the superior; acknowledging a LOTE with official status would be analogous with such contamination.

A more effective policy than English-only legislation and all the negativity it generates would be to invest in massive national ESL course networks. But even those who agree that official English policies are unnecessary may ask themselves this question: “Why should the USA, where 80 percent of the citizens are monolingual English speakers, provide services like voting, driver’s licenses, and those of other agencies in non-English languages? Doesn’t this take away all incentive for immigrants to learn English?” Mayor Bloomberg of New York does not think so. In July 2008 he signed Executive Order 120, probably the boldest act of its kind in the nation, requiring every city agency that has direct interaction with customers to provide language assistance in Spanish,

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Chinese, Korean, Russian, Italian, and French Creole, with a telephone-based service linked to interpreters who speak Urdu, Hindi, Arabic, and dozens of other languages. According to Mayor Bloomberg (Santos 2008):

The fundamental basis of government is its interaction with its citizens. If people don't know what we do, don't know what they should do, what the law requires them to do, don't know how to get services, all the money that we're spending providing those services, providing those laws, is meaningless.

That is, language assistance programs for immigrants link them to the services that the host communities have already decided to provide them, services which contribute to the overall wellbeing of the immigrants, their neighbors, and their surrounding communities. Given the contributions of immigrants to the national economy (Orrenius 2003),⁴ there is no reason for the mainstream not to assist them in acquiring services they need and in exercising their rights. As for whether language services remove incentives to learn English, if we refer back to Table 1.2 and the figures about the acute lack of ESL classes and the long waiting lists to enroll, we may conclude the following: While there may be some individuals who feel they can live life in the USA perfectly well using their non-English language – particularly the elderly – it is generally the case that immigrants realize all too well the need for English to get ahead economically and secure the futures of their families. We must also keep in mind that the children of immigrants will be English-dominant and have no need for such language programs.

A few more words about economics are warranted. Chiswick and Miller (2007) report on almost twenty years of research carried out on four continents, research that applies economic models to understanding the causes and consequences of immigrants' proficiency in the host country's dominant language. The three fundamental variables they identified, called the "three Es of language proficiency," were *Exposure* to the destination language, *Efficiency* in its acquisition, and *Economic Incentives* to acquire the language. Their findings, which were universal across the countries studied, included the following:

- (1) Destination language proficiency increases with duration in the country, educational attainment, living outside of an ethnolinguistic enclave, a younger age at immigration, and parents' proficiency in the host language (particularly the mother's proficiency);
- (2) There is a highly significant and large effect of host country language proficiency on earnings and employment;⁵
- (3) Greater typological similarity between the immigrant language and the host language is correlated with greater rates of acquisition, while greater typological distance is correlated with lower rates of acquisition.

The field of economics can thus contribute to our understanding of immigrant language-use patterns.

To conclude this section, we refer to the seminal work of Richard Ruíz (1984), who proposed three fundamental orientations toward language diversity: *language-as-a-problem*, *language-as-a-right*, and *language-as-a-resource*. According to the language-as-a-problem paradigm, linguistic diversity is a problem that needs to be solved. Similarly, language-as-a-right advocates commonly view non-English language groups as a problem with regard to school achievement, but this orientation insists that the solutions should not involve discrimination against such students and their communities. For the language-as-a-resource orientation, linguistic diversity is a national resource that should be developed both within the schools and the larger society. It is within this third context of language-as-a-resource that this volume has been conceived.⁶ Promoting linguistic diversity and helping immigrants learn English are not contradictory goals. The authors in this book agree that immigrants to the USA should learn English and should learn it well. However, this goal should not require the abandonment of the heritage language; the loss of heritage languages often has not only personal and familial repercussions, but also represents a loss to the nation as a whole. Language learning for the immigrant should not have to be a zero-sum game, substituting English for one's native language.

Aren't our current levels of linguistic diversity a recent problem due to today's high immigration rate?

Arguments about the supposedly unprecedented proportion of immigrants and the recency of linguistic diversity are unsustainable when we examine the historical facts. The geographical area that is today the USA has always been ethnolinguistically diverse. In addition to the English, early settlers included French, German, and Spanish-speaking populations, not to mention the 300-plus Native American languages that were spoken here. In colonial Pennsylvania, German-speaking immigrants made up about one third of the population and printed newspapers in German, conducted their businesses in German, educated their children in German, and drew up legal contracts in German. In fact, the US Articles of Confederation were printed in English and German. Under the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the USA acquired a territory with a French-speaking majority; Louisiana's governor from 1816–20, Jacques Villeré, spoke no English when he was elected, and Louisiana's Constitution of 1845 established that the state legislature would conduct business in both French and English. Residents of California have been conducting their lives in Spanish since the Spaniards' arrival in 1542 (not to mention the non-Europeans already living there, who had their own languages). The first Anglo settlers arrived some 275 years later, in about 1820 – thus the Southwest is full of descendants of Spanish-speakers who never immigrated here, but rather whose homelands

Table 1.3. *US foreign-born population*

| Year | Percentage foreign-born | Number of foreign-born (millions) | Percentage change |
|------|----------------------------|---|----------------------|
| 1850 | 10.0 | 2.2 | n/a |
| 1890 | 14.8 | 9.2 | 318 |
| 1900 | 13.7 | 10.4 | 13 |
| 1910 | 14.7 | 13.5 | 30 |
| 1920 | 13.2 | 13.9 | 3 |
| 1930 | 11.6 | 14.2 | 2 |
| 1940 | 8.8 | 11.6 | −18 |
| 1950 | 6.9 | 10.4 | −10 |
| 1960 | 5.3 | 9.7 | −7 |
| 1970 | 4.7 | 9.6 | −1 |
| 1980 | 6.2 | 14.1 | 47 |
| 1990 | 7.9 | 19.8 | 40 |
| 2000 | 11.1 | 31.1 | 57 |
| 2005 | 12.4 | 35.6 | 15 |
| 2006 | 12.5 | 37.9 | 6 |

Source: US Census Bureau 2000a.

were annexed by the USA. The 1849 constitution of California recognized language rights of Spanish speakers by stating that all laws, decrees, and regulations be published in both English and Spanish. In 1880, press publications in German, Yiddish, Spanish, Czech, Polish, and Italian were very common. Colorado’s 1876 constitution was printed in English, Spanish, and French, and German maintained such a strong presence that many schoolchildren of German descent received a large portion of their primary education in German up until World War I (Schiffman 1996).

Technically, all languages besides those spoken by indigenous Native Americans are in fact historically immigrant languages, and immigration figures prominently in today’s discussions about language diversity. This is despite the fact that the proportion of immigrants in the nation today is actually smaller than in the past. In 2006, the foreign-born population was estimated at 37.9 million people, or 12.5 percent of the population (Camarota 2007), which is actually a slightly smaller percentage than the almost 15 percent in 1890 and in 1910, as shown in Table 1.3.

However, it is also true that the foreign-born population dropped to between 5 percent and 9 percent during the sixty years between 1940 and 2000. Thus, the jump to 12.4 percent in 2005 is notable. In addition, the overall US population is larger with each Census, so there are larger *numbers* of foreign-born people living today in the USA than ever in its history. For example, the 14.7 percent