

Introduction

On November 11, 2000, the executive director of the organization ProEnglish, K. C. McAlpin, gave a speech at the Social Contract Writer’s Workshop called “Language as the entry point for the debate: Population numbers, immigration policy, culture.” The speech proposed language as a litmus test of who belongs in the United States and who does not. McAlpin (2000) described “multilingualism” as “troubling” (p. 124). From this perspective, people who have “no intention of abandoning their native language” are a sign of “the growing occupation of our land by alien cultures” (McAlpin, 2000, pp. 123–124). But to whom exactly was he referring? The speech touched on several different (albeit overlapping) groups, including “Hispanic” people, “East Indian” people, “Muslims,” and “Native American groups” (pp. 123–124). The inclusion of Native Americans is one particularly telling clue that this discussion is not just about immigration – it is about perceptions of language, race, and citizenship more broadly.¹

After establishing who he saw as the problem, McAlpin (2000) suggested a solution: making English the only official language. The reasoning was that “the official English movement gives us the rare opportunity to play offense. We can capitalize on this to force the issue wherever we can – through initiatives and laws to scrap bilingual education, declare English our official language, and overturn executive actions via the courts” (p. 124). A number of assumptions appeared to be in play: that multilingualism is new; that multilingualism is bad; that people of color deserve scrutiny; and that white people do not. These beliefs are not necessarily novel; what set the speech apart was its strategy.

This speech anticipated an approach that would go on to play a key role in language policy in the twenty-first-century United States: making English seem like an at-risk language in need of community protection. Language policy includes any institutional efforts to shape how people learn, view, or use a language, and the English-only movement exemplifies how piecemeal those

¹ On language, race, citizenship, and other identities as intertwined social constructions, see Brayboy (2005), Zentella (2014), Rosa and Flores (2017), Balzhiser, Pimentel, and Scott (2019), and Khan (2020).

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efforts can be: The operative phrase here is “wherever we can” (McAlpin, 2000, p. 124).² While the United States has never had an official language, localized English-only campaigns have proved more successful. Since 1980, twenty-six states,³ along with at least eighty-three city and county governments, have made English the only official language.⁴ These policies serve as symbols: As one activist put it, enacting one of these policies is like putting out an “unwelcome mat” (Wilgoren, 2002, July 19). Activists and politicians have spent decades testing and refining this approach.

Underlying this English-only movement is the idea that language is a zero-sum game: In order for English to thrive, other languages need to lose.⁵ This zero-sum framing matters, both because language is more complex in practice (Canagarajah, 2013) and because judgments about language are also judgments about people (Baugh, 2018). The people active in this movement have successfully made English official in communities and institutions around the country. These successes raise questions about what drives people to create English-only policies and how they do it.

Rather than call for reducing the number of people of color in the United States, McAlpin (2000) suggested a different, more oblique approach, one that framed the issue in terms of language policy and specifically in terms of protecting English in a variety of smaller jurisdictions. Many of the people most directly involved in successfully creating English-only policies situate their work locally, in the sense that they make English official in their own local governments and downplay these policies as harmless community initiatives. These patterns predate McAlpin. The leading activist in this movement, John Tanton, started the annual Writer’s Workshop event in 1976 and went on to found a series of organizations that worked on Official English, including the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) in 1978, U.S. English in 1983, and English Language Advocates (later renamed ProEnglish) in 1994.⁶

² I define language policy fairly capaciously, but for a comparison of various definitions of language policy and related terms like “language planning,” “linguistic culture,” and “language management,” see Calvet (1987/1998), Cooper (1989), Tollefson (1991), Schiffman (1996), Spolsky (2009), Johnson (2013), and Spolsky (2021).

³ Of these twenty-six policies, twenty-five are still in effect; Alaska’s policy was ruled unconstitutional (ACLU of Alaska, 2007). There are also two state policies that predate the current movement: Nebraska’s policy is from 1920 and Illinois’ is from 1969 (Faingold, 2018, p. 10). So, there are currently twenty-seven state policies in effect (Faingold, 2018, p. 12).

⁴ Herman (2003) lists eleven local policies (p. 101), Flowers (2017) compiles an additional sixty-five, and I discuss seven more local California policies in Chapter 1, for a total of eighty-three.

⁵ “English-only” and “Official English” have become the two most common terms, and I use them interchangeably. Both have their advantages: It is important to emphasize the *official* aspect, but it is also important to recognize that these policies are about making English the *only* official language (see Diamond, 1990, p. 119).

⁶ See Lamb (2008) on the 1976 origins of the Writer’s Workshop. There are conflicting accounts of the history of each of the organizations, but I err on the side of contemporaneous internal documents, government records, and news interviews. On FAIR, see Morgan (1978, August

I have spent the last decade studying the English-only movement and the people who shape local English-only policies. I have interviewed them, observed their events and meetings, collected drafts of their writing, read through their organizations' records, looked through their historical documents in archives, and followed their work in the news and online, all with the aim of piecing together where this movement came from, how it works, and how it might evolve. Specifically, I aimed to address the following questions:

1. How did the current English-only movement begin around 1980?
2. How do people write English-only policies? What is the role of strategies like ghostwriting, choosing genres, and using templates?
3. How do people in this movement discuss the scale of their work? How do they situate English as a local, regional, national, and/or global language?
4. How do people resist and rewrite English-only policies?

As I began to answer these questions in 2012, I sought out communities that were in the midst of proposing English-only policies so that I could examine language policy discourse as it unfolded.

I focused on four local governments in the state of Maryland: Frederick County, Anne Arundel County, Queen Anne's County, and Carroll County. What drew me to these particular counties was their swell of twenty-first-century language policy campaigns (2006–2015), their ties to one another, and the fact that despite these common threads the campaigns had divergent outcomes. These counties are all geographically close to one another and to English-only organizations in Washington, DC, which allowed me to also interview the CEO of U.S. English and the then executive director of ProEnglish. Notably, three of the four policies share some text in common with a template that ProEnglish makes publicly available. Despite this common template, the outcomes were different: One policy passed but was later repealed in 2015 (Frederick County), two policies passed easily (Queen Anne's County and Carroll County), and one policy was withdrawn from consideration before there could be a vote (Anne Arundel County). While each county is different, they also share many qualities: They are all more white, higher income, and with more people who report speaking English at home than the rest of Maryland and the rest of the United States. Researching these four counties allowed me to examine how certain policymaking practices have become common throughout the English-only movement, yet still with some variation across situations.

What I found is that most local governments passing English-only policies had the help of other local governments and at least one English-only

30). On U.S. English, see Tanton (1983, January 17) and Stanley (1983, June 24). On English Language Advocates, see Tanton (1994, January 1). On the name change from English Language Advocates to ProEnglish, see Tanton (2000, October 23).

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organization, most often ProEnglish. At the same time, what that help looked like, how welcome it was, and how successful it was have varied significantly. On one hand, when I asked Kirby Delauter about what it was like to establish an Official English policy in Frederick County, he described the process this way:

You can make it the official language any way you want, but I would do that same thing that we did. I would get outside input, you know, from people that have been in through the court system before, that's had it challenged, and get your legal team together, and get something written that's not going to be challenged in court, and explain exactly why you're doing it. And, you know, if you have the votes, do it.

Here, Delauter identifies a number of steps, including assessing the amount of support, getting “outside input” (ProEnglish, in this county's case), drafting a policy that is forceful but not too forceful, and giving reasons for “exactly why you're doing it.” Through careful coordination between elected officials, legal counsel, ProEnglish, and other people in and around the community, the Board of County Commissioners in Frederick County, Maryland, not only passed an English-only ordinance in 2012 but inspired three other Maryland counties to try and do the same. ProEnglish (2014, Fall) echoed Delauter's account in its newsletter: “During the last three years, ProEnglish has enjoyed widespread success getting official English passed at the county level, most notably in Maryland, where Frederick County, Queen Anne County [*sic*], and Carroll County all passed official English legislation in 2012 and 2013” (p. 2). Not everyone was on the same page, however.

In a very different interview, a conservative activist in Frederick County named Hayden Duke told me, “If there was an organization behind it, a national organization, I don't like that. At all. I'm sorry, I'm getting a little agitated. I don't like the groups where the people who parachute themselves into a locale, get people worked up, to fulfill their own agenda, and then leave. And they leave the people fighting each other.” Still others disagreed not just on process but on rhetoric. At one public government meeting, Frederick County commissioner Billy Shreve complained that people were too quick to focus on culture, as opposed to economics: “This is truly a business decision. You guys are missing the point. This is about dollars and protecting taxpayer dollars. When it costs \$170 to translate an 8½” × 11” memo, we have to be sure that we're doing the right thing with taxpayer dollars.” As these statements reveal, there is not necessarily a consensus about who should be involved, and what they should say, even among people who are open to English being the official language.

These dynamics and tensions are at the heart of the English-only movement. US language policy has always been a relatively localized, contingent phenomenon, with significant variation across communities and situations (Baron, 1990, p. 185; Hopkins, 2010; Dick, 2011; Urbano and Daugherty, 2021).

In 1980, activist Emmy Shafer sparked the modern movement when she had her lawyer draft an “Anti-Bilingualism” Ordinance for her local government of Dade County, Florida. In 1981, US Senator S. I. Hayakawa began recruiting local government leaders to pass resolutions in support of Official English in his home state of California. By 1982, there were so many such policies that Tanton had trouble keeping up with all of them, and he asked his staff to find a list of the “school boards, city councils and other bodies which have adopted resolutions” on Official English (Bikales, 1982, March 28). Once Tanton launched U.S. English, his first symbolic victory was a 1983 campaign against bilingual ballots in San Francisco, California (Woolard, 1989). While the earliest examples of these local language policies emerged relatively independently of each other, that gradually changed. People in this movement began not only observing one another’s work but also coordinating with, hiring, and taking advice from each other, even though they still could disagree over the details. While the English-only movement may seem like a relatively stable, united front, the people involved are actually quite varied in their approaches. Understanding the nuances of how these policies emerge and change is important because they can have serious implications for people and language, and I turn to those stakes next.

Why Official English Matters

When Carroll County, Maryland, passed an Official English ordinance in 2013, the policy’s preamble gave some reasons why. One was to “promote proficiency in English”; another was “to protect and preserve the rights of those who speak only the English language to use or obtain government programs, services, and benefits.” These explanations suggest that English is an endangered language, its users are an at-risk group, and both need government protection in order to survive. The vote on Carroll County’s ordinance was unanimous, and it is still in place today. Furthermore, this government was not alone in using this rationale: Identical wording appears in several other local English-only policies that all stem from the same template. Similar sentiments have also been part of the English-only movement since its origins (Baron, 1990, p. 79; Lo Bianco, 1999, p. 17). If one switched out “English” for any other language, this passage could fit into any treatise on language maintenance and revitalization (e.g. Fishman, 1991).

And yet, English is not just any language, and the United States is not just any linguistic environment. English enjoys the most cachet of any language in the world (Pennycook, 1994; Prendergast, 2008; Park, 2021). What’s more, people involved in the English-only movement know so. Whether they are pushing for English-only policies or protesting against them, the people I interviewed, observed, and studied in the archives are highly attuned to context.

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In this section I unpack some of this context, in order to show why these policies matter. I approach this question with humility, because the people I profile in this book articulate the stakes of the issue more memorably than I ever could. What I hope to add here is a sense of what the academic research indicates and what I have witnessed in my own life.

From my perspective, English-only policies matter for four main reasons: (1) they target people who are already marginalized, (2) they oversimplify how language works, (3) they are popular, and (4) the strategies people use to write and promote these policies are ingenious. That fourth reason is where I focus my original research – I am most curious about the processes of *how* people shape language policies like the one in Carroll County. Before I delve into the details of my study, however, I want to step back and explain *why* I find these policies worth studying. In the subsections that follow, I begin with *people*, by thinking through who is really the target of English-only policies and who is not. Second, I loop back around to *language*, by analyzing the language ideologies that underly English-only policies. While I will primarily draw examples from the United States, these ideologies have their roots in global histories of modernity and colonialism (Bauman and Briggs, 2003). Finally, I address the *popularity* of these policies, in order to show that they are not fringe; rather, they appear popular across the board in the United States. The point is that the beliefs in question are important not because they are so extreme but because they are so typical.

A quick note on facts, beliefs, and the stories we tell: Fact-checking people's beliefs about language may seem like a rather naïve and futile impulse. After all, not all policymakers are striving for fairness and accuracy. For some, the opportunity to sow discord may be a feature, not a bug (Tollefson, 1991, p. 7). Sometimes the cruelty is the point (Serwer, 2021). Facts may not be enough in the face of people's "imperviousness to the data" (Fishman, 1988, p. 31; see also Tse, 2001; Haddix, 2008; Lejano and Nero, 2020). However, I have to believe that people can change their minds, because I changed my mind. When I was young, if a pollster had asked me if English should be the only official language, I would have said, "Sure, why not?" My English classes ignored authors who wrote across languages or cultures. My Spanish classes treated Spanish like something people only used in foreign countries. My US history classes glossed over anyone who did not grow up using English. Those narratives were not the whole story; they were not even half the story. That is why it is worth carving out a place for new, more truthful stories about language. I say all this to say: For readers who have lived experiences with multilingualism, migration, and/or discrimination, the content in this section may seem obvious, and for readers who favor English-only policies, the content may seem beside the point. For readers who are still making up their mind, I wrote this part for you.

Targeting People

Roger Conner was one of the men involved in the early days of the English-only movement, and at one point he had an epiphany. Conner (1989) recalled, “I would later come to see the English language initiative as our analog to the literacy tests in the early part of the century” (p. 80). He came to this conclusion after reading John Higham’s (1955) *Strangers in the Land*, a classic (and critical) history of nativism in the United States. Starting in the mid-1800s, state and local governments used literacy tests as a tool to exclude certain people from becoming citizens and/or voting. These tests were not about actually identifying people who were illiterate in some objective sense (although that would have been problematic, too); people designed these tests with certain groups in mind. Depending on the time and place, literacy tests targeted Jewish Americans, German Americans, Irish Americans, immigrant women in general, Black Americans, Latinx Americans (including Puerto Ricans), and Asian Americans (Baron, 1990, p. x; Wan, 2014, pp. 43–49). Today’s English-only policies are not the same as these literacy tests, thankfully. If English-only policies are like an unwelcome mat, then those literacy tests were more like an electric fence. As Conner observed, however, they are part of the same impulse. Like literacy tests, English-only language policies affect some people more than others. They marginalize people who already tend to be relatively marginalized.

I purposefully say “people” rather than a more specific term like “immigrants.” Put simply, there are immigrants who are not targets, and there are nonimmigrants who are. Immigration receives a lot of attention, which is understandable since the United States has such a push–pull, love–hate, “xenophobia”–“xenophilia” relationship with the figure of the “foreigner” (Honig, 2001, p. 75). As citizens of a settler colony, people in the United States are often invested in the idea that people want to come here, work hard, and contribute to society; yet they can also resent immigrants who shine a little too brightly and threaten to overshadow them (Honig, 2001, p. 76). There is a desire for immigrants to succeed but not to stand out. To illustrate, Zentella (2014) points out “the rising number of cases of people hired for speaking Spanish, and then fired for speaking Spanish” (p. 623). These employers seem to have wanted someone who could use Spanish in a pinch, not someone who would actually use Spanish without shame. While I find Honig’s (2001) analysis of immigration indispensable, she and Zentella (2014) both point out the United States is not just a nation of immigrants (see also Dunbar-Ortiz, 2021).⁷ When Puerto Ricans or African Americans are targets, for instance,

⁷ For a different, quantitative-data-driven argument that comes to a similar conclusion, see Fitzsimmons-Doolan (2009). This corpus study of newspapers found surprisingly little overlap between discourse about language policy and discourse about immigration.

that is a sign that just being a natural-born US citizen is not enough to be safe (Richardson, 1998; Zentella, 2014, p. 623).

Meanwhile, there are many white people in the world who are multilingual or who do not even know English, but I have never heard of them experiencing the brunt of an English-only policy during the past fifty years. As Schildkraut (2005) points out, when people complain about there being too many foreign-language signs today, they are not talking about the signage outside white-owned French and Italian restaurants (p. 3). Conversely, Latinx and Asian American people do tend to be the target of contemporary English-only policies, even when they may be perfectly competent in English (Zentella, 2014; Lo, 2016). In a series of focus groups about language and American identity, participants often “refused to distinguish between recent immigrants and minorities who are also U.S. citizens” (Schildkraut, 2005, p. 168). If people are conflating all these different groups and different characteristics, then any restrictive language policy, even one that is well-meaning, will inevitably have disparate impacts. English-only policies become more meaningful in light of people’s willingness to conflate people who do not use English, people who are learning English, multilingual people, immigrants, refugees, and people of color, as though all these groups were the same, all these groups are undesirable, and all these groups are the opposite of the ideal English user.

In my own fieldwork, I quickly realized I myself am part of these assumptions around who merits linguistic scrutiny and who does not. One day in 2015, I was walking around a local fair in Frederick, Maryland, when I suddenly flinched. A man was calling out to me from a booth several feet away, trying to get my attention. He exclaimed, “Hey, you look smart!” and then asked if I would be interested in tutoring. I looked up at the booth’s banner: “Literacy Council of Frederick County.” I walked closer and replied with something like “I might be ... what would that involve?” and we started talking about their tutoring services, which focus on teaching adults to read and write in English. I had read about this organization online before and had taken note of their waitlists for classes (a sign that their services are in high demand). At one point, he asked if I was an English teacher or student, and I said I was both. We started to discuss my study. I wrote down my contact information on their volunteer sign-up sheet, in case they ever wanted someone to do tutoring or editing online. As I walked away, I was happy I had had a chance to meet him, share my study, and get some new leads, but I also thought about how easily he clocked me. Out of the hundreds of people at the fair, I was one of the few white people present, and I was the one who he invited to be an English literacy tutor, without ever saying or writing a single word of English.

I had heard about the fair from someone I interviewed, Angela Spencer. Spencer had played a key role in helping Frederick County repeal its official language policy. As we wrapped up our interview, Spencer let me know about a health fair that the Asian American Center of Frederick was organizing at the Frederick Fairgrounds later that week. I was excited to go and learn more about the linguistic and cultural landscape of the community. So, that Saturday, I drove to the location and walked into a bustling space lined with booths offering complementary medical services (everything from flu vaccines to osteoporosis screenings), as well as booths representing various social services and nonprofit organizations. I quickly realized that I was one of the only white people who were not standing behind a booth. Most of the people milling about with me were Latinx, Asian American, or Black.⁸ I also noticed that almost everyone else was dressed casually in jeans, whether they were behind a booth or not, whereas I stuck out like a sore thumb in my blouse, scarf, skirt, and tights.

Once I got back to my car, I wrote in my field notes, “I guess it was just a reminder that it’s impossible to move around the world and seem ‘neutral.’ [The man at the booth] pegged me as an outsider in general but a potential ally for himself immediately, even with no language or literacy cues.” Now, I would flip that initial analysis: What this encounter really reflects is that from many people’s perspectives, signifiers of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, citizenship, and style *are* the language and literacy cues. If you look like a straight, white, able-bodied, white-collar American woman, then you do not have to say a peep; you are presumed to be competent (not for everything, necessarily, but at least for tutoring literacy and English!).

The reverse is also true. Decades of US research suggests that people of color, immigrants, multilingual people, disabled people, and queer people (groups that sometimes overlap and sometimes do not, of course) often have their linguistic abilities discounted, particularly by white people in positions of authority (Alim and Smitherman, 2012; Davila, 2012; Flores and Rosa, 2015; Baugh, 2018; Yergeau, 2018; Flores and Rosa, 2022). Perhaps most strangely, people who know multiple languages or dialects often receive the worst treatment, despite the fact that being able to communicate across language varieties can be a resource rather than a problem (Ruíz, 1984) and historically and globally the norm rather than the exception (Canagarajah, 2013).⁹ To borrow a phrase from a collection on discrimination in higher education, many people

⁸ The makeup of this event is similar to their other offerings. In an annual report, the Asian American Center of Frederick (2018) notes that the most common participants are “non-white/black Hispanic/Latino” (54.2 percent), followed by Asian Pacific Islanders (22 percent), Black people (10.9 percent), white people (9.2 percent), and multiracial people (3.7 percent) (p. 3).

⁹ On the promise and pitfalls of the language-as-resource orientation, see Ricento (2005) and Kaveh (2022).

are presumed incompetent when it comes to the English language (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, and Harris, 2012).

Dyson (2015) captured this point about presumed incompetence poignantly in her study of one Black kindergartner whose white teacher remarks that he is a better writer than the “bright” kids in class but she still does not categorize him as “bright,” simply because of who he is (p. 205). The teacher called students bright only if they were white (with one exception for a Korean American student) (p. 205). Essentially, this teacher did the opposite of what the Literacy Council of Frederick County representative did to me: I was called smart without having to say anything, while the student in Dyson’s study was not called bright, no matter how well he writes. These dynamics are all contingent on the situation and the people involved, of course, and there are certainly exceptions. Nevertheless, I dwell on these ideas because the point is that language and literacy are not separate from power and identity. When language is already serving as a proxy for who you are, where you are from, and what level of respect people think you deserve, then language policies can become vectors of xenophobia, racism, ableism, and other forms of oppression.

Oversimplifying Language

Most English-only policies rest on a linked set of assumptions not just about people but about language itself. If I were to distill these assumptions down to their narrative essence, it would go as follows:

Everything was fine until recently, when immigrants started bringing in other languages and refusing to learn English. Now, this new rise in multilingualism is creating tension and putting English at risk. If immigrants would switch over to English, then the rest of society would treat them better. Making English the official language is a way to solve this problem, by incentivizing immigrants to assimilate faster.¹⁰

By that logic, English-only policies are helpful and harmless. The issue is that none of these statements are true. Instead, this description vastly oversimplifies how language works and has worked throughout US history. The following account comes closer to the truth:

¹⁰ As an early example of this narrative, Senator S. I. Hayakawa (1981, April 14) once remarked in a TV interview:

Up to now, people who came from Sweden, Denmark, Greece, Italy or Egypt all hurried to learn the English language. ... I’m not trying to impose hardships on immigrants. These are hardships that come by virtue of being immigrants not being able to speak the language. ... It’s a way of inviting them into the mainstream of American life more quickly. ... If we accept a second language in any American city other than English as the official language of that city, or municipality or state, then we begin to breed the seeds of possible dissension and possible division within our country. So what I’m trying to do is to head off trouble in the future.