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**U.S. ENGLISH AND THE HIDDEN AGENDA
OF THE
'ENGLISH AS THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE'
MOVEMENT**

Tom Ricento

In a recent episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the Enterprise comes across a shuttle craft tumbling out of control in deep space. The craft is brought aboard the Enterprise, and the crew is surprised to find Captain Picard inside the shuttle craft. It turns out the shuttle craft is from the future, and unless the Captain and crew of the present can figure out how to escape from the time loop they have inadvertently stumbled upon, they will be condemned to death. (According to the future-time Captain's log, the Enterprise and all of her crew are destroyed, and only Captain Picard survives.) Luckily for the Enterprise, and for Trekkies throughout the known universe, Captain Picard makes the right decision at the crucial moment, and thereby saves his ship. History (although it is actually history as seen from the future, in this case) does not repeat itself.

Because of the persistence and vitality these days of the 'Official English' movement, we too find ourselves at a crossroads: Will we, in this country, repeat mistakes made in the past to outlaw the use and teaching of immigrant languages and declare an official language—English? Or will we choose a path which recognizes the reality that there has never before been, nor is there now, any reason or benefit to be derived from declaring English our official language? Our position on these issues, even if our participation in them seems more theoretical than practical, will not only reveal our linguistic prejudices, but also inevitably influence our English language arts teaching in such matters as teaching grammar and dealing with dialect variety in our classrooms.

The situation today is no different from earlier periods in which immigrants (many of them poor) came to the United States seeking a better life; immigrants are assimilating (or trying desperately to) and are learning the majority culture's language, English. In spite of this, scapegoats are sought to explain a variety of problems whose causes are unrelated to this latest wave of immigration. To avoid a repetition of earlier episodes in American history that many would like to forget (e.g., the outlawing of the teaching of foreign languages, such as German, earlier in this century, and the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II), individuals and groups are working to provide information about the American past in the hope that informed Americans will understand the underlying nativist sentiments in the relatively recent move to declare English the Official Language of the United States. Like Captain Picard of the Starship Enterprise, we are at a crossroads; if we make the wrong decision, we will pay a hefty price for years to come.

Consider a period in American history, between 1880 and 1920, analogous to the current situation, in which millions of new immigrant groups arrived in this country. Unlike today's immigrants who come mainly from Asia and Latin America, the immigrants then were largely from Southern and Eastern Europe (no doubt many of your grandparents arrived at this time). Many in this country were alarmed; they thought "their" America was threatened by the influx of foreigners. They enlisted the help of eminent scientists of "I.Q. Testing" to do something to stem the tide. Relying on the recommendations of experimental psychologists employed by the Eugenics Research Association, the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization drafted, and the Congress passed, the Johnson-Lodge Immigration Act of 1924. Based on the results of I.Q. tests administered in English to immigrants who had recently arrived in the U.S., it was revealed that 83% of the Jews, 80% of the Hungarians, 79% of the Italians, and 87% of the Russians tested were "feeble-minded" (Kamin, 1977), and it was deemed a matter of national self-interest—indeed of national security—that quotas for immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe be drastically reduced while the quotas for the Nordic countries be increased. Many of these "feeble-minded" immigrants were deported; the number deported increased 350% in 1913 and 570% in 1914. Sixty-five years later, an organization called the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), founded by Petosky, Michigan ophthalmologist Dr. John Tanton, issued a

report calling for 25 miles of "retaining wall" fencing along the U.S.-Mexican border and a \$2 fee on people entering the United States.

Dr. Tanton was also, until last fall, chairman of U.S. English, one of the principal groups leading the Official English movement. He was forced to resign when a memorandum which he authored disclosed the underlying nativist, indeed racist, sentiments which have been denied by Official-English advocates in the past. Among questions posed in the memo were "Will the present majority peaceably hand over its political power to a group that is simply more fertile?" "Is apartheid in Southern California's future?" "As whites see their power and control over their lives declining, will they simply go quietly into the night? Or will there be an explosion?" In referring to immigration and birthrates among Hispanics, Tanton wrote: "Perhaps this is the first instance in which those with their pants up are going to get caught by those with their pants down" (Crawford, 1988). He also expressed concern about the fact that many immigrants were Catholic, a potential threat to the separation of church and state. Walter Cronkite severed his ties with the advisory board of U.S. English, and Linda Chaves, the group's president, quit to protest what she called "repugnant" and "anti-Hispanic" and "anti-Catholic" comments by her boss, Dr. Tanton. But this is only the tip of the iceberg.

It is a relatively easy matter to dismiss the arguments made by groups like U.S. English that it is in the best interest of all Americans to declare English the Official Language of the United States. In truth, I cannot find one single reasonable benefit in such a proposal. In fact, it is not likely, at least for the present, that the U.S. Congress will support the English Language Amendment (ELA), reintroduced in the 101st Congress in January of this year (although to date, 17 states have passed laws or approved ballot initiatives making English the Official Language of their respective states). What is most troubling is what the ELA and the larger Official English movement suggest about the future of American culture and American life, and our irrepressible proclivity for collective historical amnesia.

Let me first, however, rebut the principal arguments made by those who support the Official English movement. Then I will share with you some of the positive efforts being made to serve the real need of our newest immigrants. Finally, I will briefly discuss what educators in Michigan and around the nation can do to promote multiculturalism, tolerance, and

mutual respect among all Americans, regardless of where they were born or what languages they bring with them to our schools.

Let me begin with the framers of the U.S. Constitution, who considered the idea of whether to declare English the official language over 200 years ago—at a time, incidentally, when German-Americans represented a larger proportion of the population than Hispanics do today, 8.6% vs. 8.1% (Crawford, 1988). Their view then, a view that has held despite various attempts to restrict language use, was that in a democratic society, the establishment of an official language made no more sense than the establishment of an official church. The America of 1787 was no less a land of immigrants than it is in 1989. Thomas Jefferson urged his daughter to read French daily and considered a knowledge of Spanish language and culture “absolutely essential” (Ferguson and Heath, 1981). The fact that people speaking different tongues and bringing different cultures could freely come to this land without undue official harassment contributed to the development and unique culture of the United States. Immigrants then, as today, learned English because they wanted to, not because they were forced to.

According to groups such as U.S. English, today's immigrants are resisting assimilation and are refusing, in alarming numbers, to learn English. Nothing could be further from the truth. Ironically, today's immigrants are assimilating and learning English more rapidly than their ancestors of previous generations. In one study, Calvin Veltman, professor of Urban Studies at the University of Quebec, found that “by the time they have been in the country for 15 years, some 75 percent of all Hispanic immigrants are speaking English on a regular daily basis. Seven out of 10 children of Hispanic immigrant parents become English speakers for all practical purposes. . . and their children have English as their mother tongue” (Combs and Lynch, 1988). Mr. Veltman found that the Anglicization rates among Spanish speakers is now approaching a two-generational shift, compared to the more typical three generations taken by other groups of U.S. immigrants. In fact, the report concludes that “in the absence of continued immigration,” Spanish would be unable “to survive in any area of the United States.” Another survey conducted by the Rand Corporation in 1985 (Combs and Lynch, 1988), found that although only half of Mexican-American immigrants themselves have a working knowledge of English, more than 95 percent of first generation Mexican-Americans born in the U.S. are proficient in English; of the second generation, more than half speak only English. According to the study, “Spanish is increasingly subordinated to English”

among Hispanic bilinguals, who tend to raise their children with English as the first language and thus contribute substantially to the loss of Spanish.

Ironically, the U.S. English movement has contributed virtually nothing to promote English literacy among recent immigrants. Stung by charges of hypocrisy, in 1987 U.S. English finally began to aid a few private English literacy projects; these grants represented less than 1% of the group's 4 million dollar budget last year (Crawford, 1988). In Los Angeles in 1987, 40,000 perspective English as a second language students were turned away because there were not enough classes to accommodate them. Immigrants are learning English in spite of the underfunding of ESL classes and adult literacy programs. The first federal funding to promote English literacy was passed by the Congress in 1988; this is the English Literacy Grants Program, which is authorized to spend only \$15 million for FY88, increasing to \$32 million for FY93. There is some question whether this program will be fully funded for Y89, but at least it is a start. Certainly, groups like U.S. English have shown very little interest in funding English language education programs. If their agenda were a positive one, why wasn't a larger percentage of the \$18 million dollars they have raised since 1983 spent to promote English literacy?

Larry Pratt, president of English First, another English-Only group, raises more than \$2 million dollars a year, using a direct-mail letter campaign claiming that "many immigrants these days refuse to learn English! They remain stuck in a linguistic and economic ghetto, many living off welfare and costing working Americans millions of tax dollars every year" (Crawford, 1988). Even if this were true (which it isn't), how would making English the official language accomplish anything positive? Such rhetoric, clearly intended to evoke hostility and resentment, feeds on latent nativist sentiments among the populace. The message conveyed is: We must penalize these recalcitrant immigrants; they don't appreciate our largesse, and since they refuse to learn our language, we will cut off their opportunities to assimilate by taking away their ability to work at sub-minimum wage jobs no American would perform so that they will become so discouraged and desperate that they will give up and go home, never to return again. Not surprisingly this strategy is not working, at least not yet. One reason is economic: The U.S. economy simply cannot afford to lose the large source of cheap labor recent immigrants from Latin America and Southeast Asia provide. California, which contributes a large share of the National GNP,

relies heavily on cheap and abundant labor from Latin America and Asia, and communication does not seem to be a problem there.

Another bogus argument often made by groups hoping to make English the Official Language of the United States is that such a law would help unify this country. In the first place, immigrants are learning English and are assimilating, although these facts in and of themselves do not guarantee that immigrant groups will be accepted or treated with respect and equality. Instead, we are warned that these foreigners pose a threat to American security, although, as with the bogus claim that they are also refusing to learn English, there is absolutely no evidence to support these claims. Yet such scare tactics are used to arouse the nativist fears of the population. For example, in a special report for the Council of Inter-American Security (1985), R.E. Butler, Ph.D., claims that the dramatic increase in the Hispanic population poses a security threat to the United States. He says, "... Chicano . . . activists of the 1960's and 1970's resurrected the dream of a Hispanic homeland in the southwestern United States. . . (called) Aztlan. . . Indeed, forces outside our national boundaries could very well help Aztlan become a reality" (2). He refers to the "growing menace of Soviet bloc forces in Nicaragua and the inevitable exportation of the Communist revolution to adjacent states, including Mexico" (2). Butler quotes a Dutch criminal psychologist, Dick Mulder, who says, "There is a danger that the language situation could feed and guide terrorism in the US" (9). A picture is painted in which the loyalty of immigrants is suspect simply because they arrive in this country speaking a language other than English, because they listen to native language radio and TV stations, and because in the process of becoming assimilated they are usually forced by poverty to live in ethnic ghettos.

Yet, the same patterns have occurred with all previous immigrant groups to this country, without adverse effects on national unity but certainly with many adverse effects on the immigrants, many of whom were unnecessarily scarred in the process of becoming assimilated. The many Chinatowns, Italian neighborhoods, Germantowns, and other ethnic neighborhoods and communities are testament to historical patterns of immigrant settlement and assimilation. Ironically, many of these former immigrant ghettos are now home to poor blacks, clearly indicating that speaking English is no guarantee of justice or equal opportunity in the United States.

So there is really nothing new in the current situation; we have seen these patterns before. Virtually every immigrant group that has arrived in this country has been feared and despised, denied access to housing and employment, and often considered a security risk long after its members have become citizens. Witness the case of the thousands of Japanese who were rounded up and forced into internal exile during World War II. Various reasons are offered to justify such harsh measures, but, in the final analysis, they mask underlying fears and prejudices, particularly towards non-white and non-European ethnic groups. Since many of the recent immigrants fall into this category, it is not surprising that the hidden agenda is packaged in issues around which civic-spirited Americans can rally. Unity, solidarity, and equal access to political discourse seem reasonable, even innocuous, goals to the average citizen. After all, most Americans believe that English already is the official language; making it so seems only natural and proper.

This brings us to a third claim made by supporters of Official English: Making English the official language would have a symbolic value. I have to agree. It would symbolize cultural insularity, monolingualism, and divisiveness. It would symbolize an insecure and inward-looking attitude; it would serve to officially stigmatize those citizens and newly arrived immigrants who do not yet speak English, declaring that their languages, and cultures, are not welcome. For those who believe the world is shrinking and an internationalist perspective in politics and trade is indispensable to America's future, making English our official language symbolizes retreat, an unwillingness to recognize the need to foster multilingualism and multiculturalism. This is captured in a popular joke circulating these days:

What do you call someone who speaks three languages? Trilingual.

What do you call someone who speaks two languages? Bilingual.

What do you call someone who speaks one language? An American.

Making English the Official Language, aside from promoting divisiveness and intolerance, conveys the idea that Americans don't need to know other languages, that the maintenance of immigrant languages along with English is not important, that multilingualism is a luxury, not a necessity. These are exactly the opposite symbols we need today.

A fourth claim made by English-only proponents is that we must do away with bilingual education, bilingual and multilingual ballots, and other bi- and multilingual services, such as emergency 911 services and other social services now provided in languages other than English. Fortunately, bilingual ballots are still protected by the Federal Voting Rights Act, and in order to allay concerns that 911 emergency services, court translators, and other vital services would be eliminated if the ELA were passed, the Senate version of the ELA has stipulated that these services will not be affected by passage of the Amendment. Nonetheless, along with restricting immigration, cutting out bilingual education is an issue which has attracted support among those persons who reject the more sinister aspects stated or implied in the Official English movement.

First, the number of persons who could benefit from bilingual education that are actually in fully bilingual programs is relatively small. Funding levels have never been adequate, and in recent years, funding levels have declined. Second, the primary goal of bilingual education is to promote English proficiency, not to develop equal facility in two languages. The reason bilingual education was mandated was because non- or limited English speaking students were being denied equal opportunity, not because liberal legislators or jurists wanted to protect minority languages. The *Lau vs. Nichols* (1974) decision stated, in part, that "imposition of the requirement that, before a child can effectively participate in the educational program, he must already have acquired (English) skills, is to make a mockery of public education." English-only classrooms coupled with poverty and prejudice ensured that tens of thousands of Mexican-Americans would remain at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Bilingual education, more than anything else, was a pressure-valve to relieve an intolerable situation among a segment of the population. It was never intended to foster true bilingualism among Hispanic and Anglo students. (In contrast, French Immersion programs in Canada have succeeded in developing a high degree of fluency in French among English-speaking Canadians, who constitute the majority group in Canada.)

Although U.S. English and other groups and individuals point to students who show bilingual education has failed in some districts, the great bulk of research shows that the most efficient way to acquire a second language is to become proficient in the native language. When mathematics education produces dismal results in our schools, no one proposes to do away with it. Yet underfunded bilingual programs which are constantly

under attack are dismissed out of hand. It is more than coincidental that Spanish is not valued, and its speakers are often poor and stigmatized as a group. In Canada, French Immersion programs work quite well; but in Canada, the native language of French Immersion students is English, a high-status language, whose speakers are middle-class, and whose culture and language is not suspect. Spanish immersion programs for anglos in Los Angeles and several other cities work well; students are congratulated for acquiring another language. On the other hand, Spanish-speakers in submersion programs are expected to be proficient in their second language, English, even though no allowance is made for the fact that they have often been thrust into a new culture, a new language, and a new school setting simultaneously.

To date, 17 states have passed Official English measures, and several other states are considering measures (including Michigan). What has happened in states that have already passed Official English resolutions? Proposition 63 was passed in California in 1986, and it provided that individuals could sue and seek damages against those who violated the provisions of the proposal. In every case that has come before the courts, those bringing suits have lost. In the latest ruling on January 27 of this year, the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals said that the English Only requirement violated federal civil rights law by contributing to "a workplace atmosphere that derogates Hispanics, encourages discriminatory behavior...and heightens racial animosity." The court rejected arguments that the rule prohibiting the use of languages other than English was needed to keep the workplace from becoming "a Tower of Babel," or to "preserve and enhance" English as the state's official language (*Epic Events*, March/April, 1988). Judge Stephen Reinhardt said in his opinion that Proposition 63 is "primarily a symbolic statement" that does not justify English Only rules in the workplace. Former Senator Hayakawa, a leader of the Proposition 63 campaign, reacted angrily to the appeals court ruling, stating, "Who the hell decided it was primarily symbolic?" According to Hayakawa, if a Hunting Park Court employee speaks another language on the job—for example saying "Where shall we go for lunch?" in Spanish—that would be a violation of Proposition 63 (*Epic Events*, March/April, 1988). The Judge said not only are English Only policies unwarranted, but they may "create an atmosphere of inferiority, isolation, and intimidation....Although an individual may learn English and become assimilated in American society, his primary language remains an important link to his ethnic culture and identity." U.S. English recently

established a Legal Defense Fund to fight challenges to Official English throughout the states, but courts, at least so far, have basically said such proposals are unenforceable.

What can be done to offset the divisive and nonproductive agenda of U.S. English, English First, and similar groups? What can concerned educators do in their communities and classrooms to promote tolerance, multiculturalism, and respect for speakers of minority languages and members of minority cultures? First, you can educate your colleagues and friends about the true goals of groups that support Official English. You can tell them that FAIR received money from organizations such as the Pioneer Fund, a little-known foundation dedicated to "racial betterment" through genetics (Crawford, 1988). You can tell them that making English the official language will not provide one cent for English literacy programs, that such a law would likely be unenforceable and would send the clear message that if you don't speak English, you will be a second-class citizen and your language and culture probably don't count for very much. You can tell them that immigrants today are learning English and are struggling as fiercely as any immigrant group in the past to make it in American society. You can tell them that more than 10,000 Japanese businessmen sell their products in the U.S. in English while some 900 monolingual American businessmen struggle in Japan (Moss, n.d.), at the same time that our trade deficit continues to grow. You can tell them that fewer than 1% of our elementary school students ever get exposure to a foreign language, less than 5% of our college graduates are even minimally fluent in a second language, and the Department of Defense can fill only half of the language-competent positions it needs.

Second, you can promote respect for different cultures and languages in your classrooms. If you are lucky enough to have speakers of other languages in your class, you have an opportunity to promote global understanding not offered by any textbook. You have a resource for students to take advantage of. Learning about other lands and cultures won't be an abstract exercise when you have a representative in the flesh. You can convey the value of speaking more than one language, that bi- or multilingualism is a plus, not a minus. You need to keep in mind that throughout most of the world, multilingualism is the norm; only in the United States and a few other countries is monolingualism the norm.

If you don't have international students, many materials are available, including culturgrams, videos, international pen-pal associations, and more. In Colorado, one teacher's world awareness program, which began 3 years ago as a one-day event, last year had grown to a one-week extravaganza in which some 125 foreign students from 40 countries around the world created something like an international carnival of events, with native dress, dance, customs, foods, and serious discussions about world hunger, world peace, and international cooperation.

Third, you can support organizations, such as EPIC, which are lobbying and disseminating information regarding the Official English movement, and which also sponsor activities, such as forums and workshops, designed to educate the public about the real dangers posed by the Official English movement and to promote dialogue which tends to foster not only tolerance towards multiculturalism and multilingualism, but supports increases in funding for foreign language instruction in our schools.

You can write to your representatives in Congress to state your opposition to the ELA. You can become involved in local and state efforts to pass pro-active legislation, that is, legislation that endorses the idea of safeguarding and promoting multiculturalism in our communities and schools. For example, New Mexico, on March 2, 1989, became the first state in the nation to officially support the concept of English Plus. HJM 16, a joint memorial supporting language rights in the United States, reaffirms the importance of preserving the cultures and language of our nation and the need to foster proficiency in other languages. It further states the belief that the position of English is not threatened, and that proficiency in more than one language is to the economic and cultural benefit of the state of New Mexico, and to the United States, generally.

A number of state and national professional teacher organizations have passed resolutions supporting the idea of English Plus. The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) passed a policy resolution at their annual meeting in March, 1988. The National Language Policy that was adopted has three inseparable parts:

- (1) to provide resources to enable native and non-native speakers to achieve oral and literate competence in English;
- (2) to support programs that assert the legitimacy of native language and dialects and ensure that proficiency in the

mother tongue will not be lost; and

- (3) to foster the teaching of languages other than English so that native speakers of English can rediscover the language of their heritage or learn a second language.

International TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages), an organization of over 40,000 members world-wide, has also passed a resolution endorsing the idea of English Plus, as have a number of state and regional TESOL affiliates.

While such positive steps are heartening, much more needs to be done to educate the public. Those who vote to make English the official language in state referenda often believe that they are making a positive statement to promote national unity, that they are "standing up for" America and its unofficial official language, English. Others are venting frustrations at their powerlessness in the face of foreign competition in the marketplace and at the workplace. Ironically, the Reagan and Bush administrations have resisted protectionism in the economic sphere, even in the face of unfair trade practices on the part of the Japanese and some of our Western European allies. While many believe economic protectionism, even if desirable, will backfire, creating a trade war which will do more harm than good to American economic interests, the folly of linguistic protectionism (a truly Orwellian concept) has far greater potential to play havoc with national life and social harmony than do trade sanctions. President Bush, to his credit, has been consistently against making English the Official language of the United States for basically the same reasons discussed in this article.

It is ironic that conservatives who support the Bush administration's position on trade policy, deregulation, and gun control ("We don't want government interfering in our personal lives.") are often the most vocal supporters of Official English proposals. Those who truly wish to stand up for America and American values of free enterprise can do no less than to support the more basic freedom, under the Constitution, of free speech, a freedom which does not confer special privilege for speakers of one language (English) over speakers of other languages. If English were to become the Official Language of the United States, the most fundamental of American liberties will have been transformed in a way that the framers of the Constitution would have thought unimaginable 200 years ago. At a time when many languages were spoken and written, the framers considered the

idea of declaring an official national language, but thought better of it. If multilingualism was tolerated and protected in colonial America, at a time when any of a number of languages could have gained ascendance as the dominant public language, why should we be concerned today at time when English has become not only the unchallenged language of public discourse in this country but arguably the dominant world language as well?

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