

The English-Only movement in the U.S.

Ten years ago, the "U.S. English" organization was founded in Washington, D.C., under the auspices of three well-known representatives of the "new conservatism." California Senator S. I. Hayakawa, a linguist of Japanese descent born in Canada, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, honorary chairman of "Arizonans for Official English," and William J. Bennett, Director of the Federal Education Department in the Reagan administration, promoted the idea that bilingualism is the main threat to the integrity of the Anglo-American republic.

There are historical precedents for this movement. Edward M. Chen, in his article "'English Only' breeding bigotry in the U.S.," states:

"The current English Only movement is not unprecedented; it bears great similarity to the racist nativist movements which arose in response to the wave of immigration from southern and eastern Europe between 1890 and 1914.

"The Federal Immigration Commission issued a report in 1911, striking a contrast between 'old' and 'new' immigrants, in which it argued that the former had mingled quickly with native-born Americans and became assimilated, while the 'new' immigrants from Italy, Russia, Hungary and other countries were less intelligent, less willing to learn English, or had intentions of not settling permanently in the United States. These arguments are strikingly similar to those advanced by the current English Only movement.

"In response, English literacy requirements were established as conditions for public employment,

naturalization, immigration and suffrage, in order to exclude those perceived to be of lower class and 'ignorant of our laws and language.' The New York Constitution was amended to disenfranchise over one million Yiddish-speaking citizens, by a Republican administration fearful of Jewish votes. The California Constitution was similarly amended to disenfranchise Chinese voters."

Among the arguments advanced by English Only proponents, this comment by Senator Hayakawa is particularly noteworthy:

"During the six years I served as a United States Senator, I realized that our country was heading toward a crisis that no one seemed willing to address. We have unwisely embarked upon a policy of so-called 'bilingualism,' putting foreign languages in competition with our own. English has long been the main unifying force of the American people. Yet now, prolonged bilingual education in public schools and multilingual ballots threaten to divide us along language lines.

"English is under attack in America.... It's frightening.... We are plunging into a bilingual society. Or, more accurately, we are being pushed into a bilingual society. And I believe that if this continues, we face grave consequences as a society. Former Mayor Maurice Ferre of Miami demonstrated the aggressiveness of the bilingual movement when he said, 'You can be born in a Cuban hospital, be baptized by a Cuban priest, buy all your food from a Cuban grocer, take your insurance from a Cuban broker and pay for it all with a check from a Cuban bank. You can get all the news in Spanish, read the Spanish daily paper, watch Spanish TV, listen to Spanish radio. You can

There are various organizations which advocate English as the mandatory, official language of the U.S. population and its territory. This movement gains strength with each passing day and, although it may appeal to common sense, runs the risk of becoming a "modern Inquisition" against all those immigrants whose native language is not English.

A text based on *The crossroads of language: an essay on official English, the defense of native Spanish and the de-colonization of Puerto Rico* by Pedro Juan Rúa, Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, 1992, 101 pp.

go through life without ever having to speak English at all. English is not necessary in order to be a citizen.”

Gerda Bikales, a German immigrant, focuses the fight more directly on Spanish: “The Hispanic minority, which constitutes 75 percent of the students in bilingual education programs at present, has grown to over 20 million people, thus making the United States the country with the fourth-largest Hispanic population in the world. If we allow this to continue, we will create a permanent under-class in this country for the first time in history, something which could be very dangerous.”

Besides “U.S. English,” there are other organizations which advocate the establishment of English only; they include the “English First” group, whose headquarters are in Sacramento, California, and whose board of directors includes state legislature senators and representatives; the “Council for Inter-American Security,” the “American Ethnic Coalition,” and “The Pioneer Fund,” among others.

According to Pedro Rua, these organizations compete among themselves, but forget their differences when the following goals are at stake:

1. The approval of the “English Language Amendment” to the U.S. Constitution, which would institutionalize the official status of English. Short of this, they seek an equivalent federal law or state-by-state legislation to the same effect.
2. A Supreme Court judgement which would re-interpret the Constitution and effectively decree English to be the official language, linking this measure with the definition of U.S. citizenship. Or, short of this, a Supreme Court decision overturning federal, state and territorial laws which promote bilingualism and multilingualism.
3. The repeal of education laws and legislation in public service regulations which promote bilingual education in elementary and secondary schools.
4. The application of the English Only guidelines.

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The movement appears to focus its attention on Hispanic immigration, as can be observed in the introduction written by Iowa Senator Steve Symms—a proponent of the Senate “English Language Amendment”—to the 1985 “Special Report” on the issue.

The report, entitled “On creating a Hispanic America: a nation within a nation?”, was prepared by the “Council for Inter-American Security.” The following are highlights from the text:

“Of all our minorities, Hispanics are the youngest, fastest growing and most concentrated in urban areas...; Chicano, or Mexican-American activists of the 1960s and 1970s resurrected the dream of a Hispanic homeland in the southwestern United States... called Aztlan...; the dream has never died. Indeed, forces outside our national boundaries could very well help Aztlan become a reality...the deteriorating economic conditions of those countries and the ease with which people can vote with their feet by simply walking north. Yet at home, we have a federally-sponsored program which helps promote a distinct Hispanic identity, preserve the Spanish language and engender a separatist mentality: bilingual education.

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“Dutch criminal psychologist Dick Mulder has said that ‘there is a danger that the language situation could feed and guide terrorism in the U.S.’ Therefore, bilingual education and the ideal of Aztlan as a potential Hispanic homeland has national security implications.... Hispanic Americans have a fertility rate far greater than the Anglo-American majority or the Black minority. This, combined with the large numbers of illegal Hispanic immigrants and cemented by common linguistic cultural ties, could spell trouble for the United States.”

“Official English” victories

The state of Virginia, one of the “cradles” of the Anglo-American nation and home to several of that nation’s Founding Fathers, was the starting point of the current English Only movement. In 1981, the state legislature approved “Official English” legislation, with hardly any opposition.

This same statute was approved in 1984, in the states of Indiana, Kentucky and Tennessee, and in 1986 in Georgia. In the same year, a referendum was held in California. The results of “Proposition 63,” which was approved by 73 percent of the voters, allowed the state constitution to be amended to declare English to be the official state language.

businesses, ranging from hospitals to bottling plants, are requiring that their employees speak English on the job.... The bulk of the legal challenges to such restrictions involve conversations among employees. Civil rights lawyers say it is impossible to estimate the number of businesses that have imposed such restrictions.”

Further on, the article states: “Two of the cases pursued by the agency (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Washington) involve language restrictions in southern California. In one, Aida Dimaranan, a Filipino nurse, has accused Pomona Valley Hospital of barring the use of her native language on the job.

“Official English does not require agencies to start referring to the city at the end of the Golden Gate Bridge as ‘St. Frank’ ”

“In the other, Leonor Hernández, a clerk/typist at a Sears Roebuck Co. billing office in Los Angeles, has filed suit against Sears over a rule forbidding her to speak Spanish on the job.

“The Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, a rights group, is now pursuing at least eight other language discrimination cases.... In addition to California... complaints of language discrimination have been raised in a number of other states, including Florida, Texas, Illinois and Arizona.”

Two years previously, the Colorado state Senate enacted strict regulations governing state universities, which prevented the hiring of any professors who did not have a full command of English (“proficiency”), and Robert R. Oliva, a Cuban researcher at Florida International University, discovered a large number of cases of job suspensions or terminations due to English-only guidelines.

Researchers Ralph L. Quiñones and Francisco F. Coronel of Loyola Marymount University in California confirm that there are growing obstacles to the marketing of Hispanic products, which not only affect Spanish-language publicity campaigns —some radio stations which feature broadcasts in Spanish have been closed due to the withdrawal of financial backing— and sales and purchase procedures at some Spanish-speaking businesses located in the United States, but have also affected products from Latin American countries.

Puerto Rico = Quebec?

In April 1988, at the First International Conference on Comparative Linguistic Law in Montreal, Canada, a noteworthy event took place. While Puerto Rican scholar Luis Muñiz Argüelles was reading his conference paper, he was interrupted by Gerda Bikales —the Executive Director of “U.S. English”— who told him that the United States, and she herself, would do everything in their power to handle Puerto Rico in such a way as to prevent a repetition of the English-speaking Canadian experience with French-speaking Quebec.

Eight months previously, A.W. Maldonado wrote in *El Reportero*: “The great fear (of Official English) is that on the premise that Hispanics do not need to learn English in order to live and work in the United States, another country will be created within the existing one —something similar to the Canadian situation.”

The metaphor of “Puerto Rico = Quebec” has been employed by various figures and media: Republican Patrick Buchanan used it in May 1990; it appeared in a *Detroit-Michigan News* editorial one month later; in July, it appeared in the *National Review*, whose Senior Editor is William J. Bennett; towards the end of the same month, it appeared in *Newsweek*; at the end of 1990, columnist James J. Kilpatrick wrote, “Puerto Ricans... does anyone hear an echo of Quebec?”

In 1991, Gerda Bikales announced her departure from “U.S. English,” in order to form an organization specifically dedicated to meeting the threat of a Caribbean Quebec, called “The Emergency Committee on Puerto Rican Statehood and the Status of English in the United States.”

Moreover, James Michener, author of such best-sellers as *South Pacific*, *Centennial* and *Hawaii*, has written a novel entitled *Texas* in which he argues: “For a nation like

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the United States, which has a workable central tongue used by many countries around the world, the conscious introduction of linguistic separation and its subsequent encouragement through the expenditure of public funds, is equivalent to creating and provoking a threat which in time could destroy this nation, as other nations with linguistic problems have been destroyed.”

Conclusions

It is understandable for a nation to wish to preserve its culture and traditions. However, every virtue, when carried to extremes, becomes a vice, sacrifices a certain amount of respectability, and at a certain point, runs the risk of becoming ridiculous.

One such example is given in an article by Gail Diane Cox in the *National Law Journal*: "Immediately after the vote (on California's Proposition 63) state bureaucrats, desperate for a practical translation applicable to their daily work, flocked to the State Attorney General's office for counsel. His legal opinion... said Official English does not require state agencies to redraft their multi-lingual welfare forms, stop advertising state lottery tickets on salsa music stations, or start referring to the city at the end of the Golden Gate Bridge as 'St. Frank.'"

According to Pedro Juan Rua, the English Only movement embodies the exclusionary aspirations of an ethnic group which wants to advance itself from being the largest, to being the only, ethnic presence in the nation.

In this regard, it is worth quoting a comment by the fourth President of the United States, James Madison, author of *The Federalist Papers*: "Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society. It ever has been and ever will be pursued until it is obtained, or until liberty is lost in the pursuit. In a society under the forms

of which the stronger faction can readily unite and oppress the weaker, anarchy may as truly be said to reign as in a state of nature, where the weaker individual is not secured against the violence of the stronger."

Certainly English is the language which should be in official use in the United States. However, this fact should not be twisted by guidelines which, rather than defending English as the vernacular, constitute a new form of "witch-hunt."

The more a language comes into general use, the more people will learn it for their own convenience. Just as we leave our economy in the hands of market laws, so we should trust in the ability of the language used in any country to emerge unscathed, without the need to resort to force or fomenting ethnic hatred. It has been noted, for example, that the children of immigrants wind up adopting the native language of their country of residence as their own native language.

Discrimination and intolerance only encourage the deterioration of those nations which promote such attitudes. Thus, while a great nation is founded upon cooperation between its inhabitants, it may destroy itself if it promotes hatred among its citizens ❧

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