

# **The Conflict of Languages in the United States**

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The United States of America has no history; it is a new state. Though it does have a few indigenous inhabitants, the overwhelming majority of its inhabitants are immigrants. There is no history of a common culture or a common language developed over hundreds or thousands of years in the United States; however, the various backgrounds of the United States have combined to form a new American culture. Immigration continues, and with this immigration a conflict occurs between the common language of the United States and the languages of the new immigrants. In order to form a more perfect union it is necessary that all residents of the United States of America, both citizens and non-citizens, share a common language so that they can communicate amongst one another freely; however, this does not mean that all other languages should be suppressed. It is in the best interest of the United States for its residents to share a common language and to retain familiarity with other languages.

There is little argument that English is the common language of the United States. Over 97% of the residents of the United States speak English<sup>1</sup>. Several rulings of the United States Supreme Court recognise the primacy of the English language in the United States, though it has never been established as the official language.<sup>2</sup> Fernando Mateo, a Dominican immigrant and owner of several New York City area businesses, attributes his success to his knowledge of English: "You are a nobody in this country if you can't speak English. I am a firm believer that if you live in France, my language should be French. If I live in Spain, my language should be Spanish. If I live in the United States my language should be English."<sup>3</sup> Many other members of the immigrant population of the United States share Mateo's sentiments. Recent surveys have shown that a majority of parents of limited-English children think that it is more important for their children to

learn English and have other subjects taught in English than for their children to receive instruction in their native tongue.<sup>4</sup> A law suit filed in Brooklyn in September of 1995 by one hundred and fifty parents claimed that their students had failed to receive adequate instruction in English, “the crucial skill that leads to equal opportunity in schooling, jobs, and public life in the United States.”<sup>5</sup> Alice Callaghan, an operator of a day-care centre for poor families in Los Angeles, notes that the families she works with “work in the garment district sweatshops, they sell tamales on the street, [and] they clean offices downtown,” and they worry this is the only future for their children if they do not learn English.

There a number of residents of the United States who fear that the limited-English immigrant population of the United States poses a security threat to the United States. They often point to Canada’s trouble with the province of Quebec. Quebec was originally a French colony; however, the British settled most of the rest of Canada. Today, the population of Quebec is predominantly French speaking while the rest of the Canada is predominantly English speaking. Many of the French-speaking Quebecois have grown fearful that the predominantly English-speaking Canadian federal government will destroy their culture. This fear has led to amendment of Canada’s constitution to allow more autonomy for Quebec. Quebec’s parliamentary election on the December 1, 1998 still showed strong support for the Quebec nationalist party, which seeks independence from Canada. A similar situation is unlikely in the United States. The state of Canada was founded as an outgrowth of the British state, but the United States was formed as a reaction to the British state. The Quebecois never felt as if they were a part of the British culture; however, the post-revolutionary government of the United States sought to include all cultures living in the

United States. The Articles of Confederation, the original constitution of the United States, was printed in both English and German.<sup>6</sup> Wave after wave of immigrants has been assimilated into the English speaking United States.

Additionally, non-English speakers discomfort many residents of the United States. This has led to the creation of rules forbidding the speaking of any language besides English in workplaces. These rules are created for reasons such as fear that they will make customers uncomfortable and fear that harassing things might be being said. For the most part, these fears are unfounded.<sup>7</sup> It is just as easy for individuals to come with some sort of code for the purpose of deceiving others as to what they are talking about as it is for individuals to discuss in a foreign language.

On the other side of the conflict, many worry that forcing children to learn the English forces them to give up their native cultures and become Americanised. The change of language does not always have to result in the destruction of traditional customs as the case of modern Wales demonstrates. Even though the majority of the Welsh people no longer speak Welsh—instead they speak English—they have not become Anglicised; their culture remains Welsh in that it is unique culture apart from that of the surrounding areas. The religious traditions of modern Wales are much the same as they were before English was the common language of Wales.<sup>8</sup> It is possible for a culture to survive even if the common language of the culture changes.

Though it is widely acknowledged that knowledge of the English language and the linguistic bond it creates with the other residents of the United States is needed for success in the United States, one should be careful not to overlook the positives of multilingualism. The varied

backgrounds of the residents of the United States should be viewed as an asset. The economies of the United States and, indeed, the world are becoming increasingly globalised. It is unreasonable to think that one will only be doing business with those that speak English fluently. Knowledge of languages and cultures other than one's own provides one with a better understanding of those with which one does business. One is better able to personally relate to another if one feels that they share a common background. The understanding of others also facilitates co-operation between cultures. The multicultural makeup of the residents of the United States provides solid ground for the United States in the global economy and global politics of the future.

Once it is established that both a fluent knowledge of English and the maintenance of a degree of knowledge of native languages is desired a way must be found to educate the youth of the nation to achieve these goals. There are two main schools of thoughts on how to achieve these goals: bilingual education and English immersion. Both approaches have met with varying degrees of success.

Modern bilingual education first came into existence after the passage of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 by the United States Congress. This act provided funding to the state education agencies and local school boards for the purpose of providing bilingual education programs to limited English proficient students. The purpose of bilingual education is to teach students subjects in their native language while also teaching English. The goal is to move the students into main stream English classes after they become proficient in English.<sup>9</sup> Bilingual education has had its successes. The bilingual education program at Cahuenga Elementary in Los Angeles taught students in some combination of English, Spanish, and

Korean. Cahuenga's students were able to read and write in English at levels higher than that of their peers throughout the nation, even though most came from homes where no English is spoken.<sup>10</sup> Critics of bilingual education claim that non-English proficient students are discriminated against by being segregated for a long period of time from mainstream classes. Many others believe that the goal of bilingual education has moved from assimilating students into English classrooms to maintaining the student's cultural identity. Critics fear that these students are relegated to "ethnic ghettos" because they never gain a proper understanding of English.<sup>11</sup>

Critics of the California's bilingual education system, led by Robert Unz, successfully destroyed that state's bilingual education in favour of an English immersion program via a ballot initiative known as Proposition 227. Though even today Proposition 227 faces many legal tests it is important not only because 61% of voters voted in favour of it but because over two-thirds of the state's Latino voters favoured the proposition.<sup>12</sup>

English immersion, as described by proposition 227, places students with limited English ability into a special class in which they are given an intensive course in English for one school year. After the year of intense English they are then moved into mainstream English classes.<sup>13</sup> Critics have dubbed this method as "sink or swim," because they fear that if students do not gain an understanding of English in the first year then they will be unable to succeed in English only classes. When parents are given the choice between bilingual education and English immersion for their students the reaction of Carolina Aguayo is fairly typical: "Parents should be the ones to teach children their language, and schools should teach them English."<sup>14</sup> This approach requires the support of the parents to encourage

the proficiency of multiple languages of their children, which is one of its major shortcomings.

Both approaches to English instruction have their merits, and it would be hard to prescribe a single solution that would adequately meet all communities needs. This is where one of the strengths of the United States federal system makes itself known. The federal government has the ability to allow the individual state governments to determine their own course to follow. The question over how best to encourage proficiency in English is a decision best left to local authorities because they are better equipped to deal with the changing demands of their community and judge the results of their actions.

The United States of America is a country founded on diversity. When it was created its inhabitants spoke a number of languages, and it is important in the global village of the future that the United States retain this multicultural nature. The conflict between languages in the United States is best solved by acknowledgement of the people that there is a need for common language shared by all of the residents of the United States and that there is also desirable for the residents of the United States to have knowledge of languages besides the common language. It must be accepted that languages other than English are not a threat to the safety and security of the nation, and that the current influx of immigrants is just like the series of immigrations before it. The culture of the United States will eventually expand to accept and assimilate these new immigrants as it has in the past, but the residents of the United States must never lose sight of their varied pasts and their common future.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Debate Over English Ever*. Washington: National Education Association, March 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Teresa Scassa, "Language, Culture, and the Courts: Bilingual Education in the United States," *Canadian Review of America* 26.1 (1996): 31-48.

<sup>3</sup> Michael A. Fletcher, "Language Rules Translate into Litigation," *Washington Post* 30 Nov. 1998: A1.

<sup>4</sup> Rosalie Pedalino Porter, "The Case Against Bilingual Education," *The Atlantic Monthly* 281.5 (1998): 28-39.

<sup>5</sup> Porter

<sup>6</sup> NEA

<sup>7</sup> Fletcher

<sup>8</sup> Information about Wales is from Jeremy Black, *A History of the British Isles*, Hong Kong: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1997: 289-294.

<sup>9</sup> Information about bilingual education is from Herman Curiel, "Bilingual Education and the American Dream: a Bridge or a Barrier?," *Social Work in Education* 13.1 (1990): 7-22.

<sup>10</sup> Karen Brandon, "War of Words Not Over," *Chicago Tribune* 4 June 1998: A1.

<sup>11</sup> "An End to Bilingual Education," BBC News, 3 June 1998, Online, available 3 Dec 1998,

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel B. Wood, "Vote to Eliminate Bilingual Education in California Resonates Nationwide," *Christian Science Monitor* 4 June 1998: 10.

<sup>13</sup> "First Students Test California's 'English Immersion' Law," CNN Interactive, 3 Aug 1998, Online, available 3 Dec 1998, <http://www.cnn.com/US/9808/03/bilingual.ends/>

<sup>14</sup> Nanette Asimov, "Prop. 227 Upheld by U.S. Judge 'No constitutional right to bilingual education'," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 July 1998: A1.