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An Official Language for the United States?

Many people think that English is the official language of the United States, but it is not. The United States does not have an official language. When a country declares an official language it simply means that all official government business must be done in that language. All official government business in the United States is done in English, but no law requires this. English can nevertheless be considered the national language of the country, insofar as it is the most widely used in the country.

In 1986, the Senate held hearings to debate whether or not the United States should add an amendment to the Constitution declaring English to be the official language of the country. The amendment never made it out of the hearings. Since then, a similar amendment has been introduced each year, but none has yet been successful. However, as of summer 2000, twenty-three states have declared English to be their official language: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wyoming. The issues in Alabama and Alaska are being challenged in court, and Arizona's state constitutional amendment was overturned altogether. There are thus twenty states with Official English legislation in effect at present. On the other hand, however, some states and cities have recognized other languages as well as English: Hawaii has declared English and Hawaiian as co-official languages; New Mexico has passed a referendum supporting language rights in the United States; and several cities, including Cleveland, have declared themselves multicultural, multilingual, bilingual, or multiracial.

When governments make policies or laws that deal with language, as they often must, it is referred to as language planning. Language planning can range from merely encouraging citizens to learn the languages of other countries to declaring official languages. Why is there so much political activity concerning language in the United States? Why should the United States declare an official language?

There are many reasons for nations to declare an official language. Many developing nations have so many languages spoken within their borders that they must pick one or two to be the official language to avoid trying to deal with five, ten, or more languages on an official level. Some countries declare an indigenous language to be official in order to preserve the language's heritage. In Ireland, for example, the indigenous language was Irish, but it is in the process of being replaced by English. Declaring Irish the official language of the country is a way of recognizing the place and importance of this language in the

country's past. A world language, a language such as English or French, used over wide areas of the globe, is often chosen as the official language of developing countries, even though it may not be the native language of any speakers in that country. Making a world language official in a country makes it easier for that country to participate in the world economy.

However, there are also good political and social reasons against declaring an official language in some places. What is the situation in the United States compared to other nations? What implications might declaring an official language have for us?

Some nations are monolingual, some are bilingual, while others are multilingual. Each situation poses its own problems and can be complicated by various social factors. Monolingual nations, where the majority speaks only one language, are rare. Language planning might not seem to be much of a problem in such countries, but it is. Korea, for example, is an example of a monolingual nation, but much emphasis is placed on its citizens learning other languages in order to be able to compete in the world economy. Bilingual nations such as Canada have two large separate language-speaking groups. Quebec has a French-speaking majority, while the rest of the country has an English-speaking majority. Multilingual nations, where many different languages are spoken, are most common. In Switzerland, for example, French, German, Italian, and Romansch are spoken. Over three hundred languages are spoken in India. Often in these cases, one or more languages are recognized and promoted as national or official languages to allow the government to efficiently conduct its business. So, for example, Hindi and English are the official languages of India (and various states have additional official languages).

The United States is hard to characterize as either monolingual or multilingual. We could, in a way, be considered either. The majority of citizens speak English, but there are hundreds of different languages spoken within our borders. Over thirty languages have more than a thousand speakers each. In New Mexico, nearly half the population speaks a non-English language, but the majority of these people speak English as well. One out of seven people in the United States speaks a language other than English at home or lives with other family members who do. Almost three out of five of those people who speak languages other than English at home are American-born (and thus are citizens of the United States). However, English is not being overtaken by any other language in the world. We already have one of the strongest world languages as our national language, and all official governmental business is already done exclusively in English. So is there really any need for an official language in the United States?

Proponents of official English claim that making English official will force immigrants to learn English. Opponents contend, however, that most immigrants who come to the United States know that learning English is essential and that a law is not required to tell them this, nor will it make them learn English faster. Opponents fear that declaring English the official language could tell newcomers that the United States is not tolerant of differences. People sometimes have the impression that immigrant groups do not make progress in learning English. However, this is certainly not the case. It may seem this way, since there is usually a gradual flow of immigrants to one area, and as one group masters English, another group arrives and begins to learn it.

Many people feel very strongly that making English official will imply that other languages don't deserve a noteworthy place in our history. English is not the only language that has played a special role in the development of our country. The modern United States was built by immigrants from many different countries, many speaking different languages, such as Spanish, Polish, and German. In the late eighteenth century, for example, there was a large German-speaking population in the United States. And of course, before the Europeans ever came to the "New World," there were hundreds of languages spoken by

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Native Americans in the area of what is now the United States. These languages have played important roles in our national history and enriched the English language itself.

Proponents have claimed that making English the official language of the United States is only a symbolic act. But opponents counter that symbolic acts can carry a lot of weight, both politically and socially. On the political side, they contend that making English the official language sets a precedent of placing English above all other languages. This opens the door for laws abolishing bilingual ballots, which might prevent citizens who are not comfortable with English from participating in the political process. It could also lead to laws prohibiting the use of public funds for printing materials in non-English languages, including safety messages on insecticides and other products, which, if used improperly, could be dangerous for the users as well as others around them.

On the social side, opponents of official English argue that making English the official language degrades all non-English languages and gives people the feeling that their prejudices are justified. They worry that some individuals who might dislike a non-English speaking group could feel that making English the official language validates their feelings, thus allowing them to be more open in their contempt for non-English speaking groups.

We must analyze the motivations of the official English movement carefully. Are the proposed threats real? Are the supposed advantages needed? First and foremost we must recognize the potentially destructive consequences of declaring one language the official language in a multicultural, democratic nation.

References

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