

When language endangerment is imagined: the 'threat' to the English language in the USA

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This is a discussion activity. You may read more on language endangerment in Chapter 8 of the Book of Knowledge at www.languagesindanger.eu.

Some movements (such as The English-Only Movement) claim that the English language is 'endangered' as more and more immigrants are moving into the United States who do not speak English and are encouraged not to learn English because the government currently provides multilingual resources for them. The growing move to multilingualism, the English-Only movement warns, will lead to disunity and separatism in the United States. The reality is that U.S. English and other English-Only organizations are more concerned with immigration per se, especially from non-European countries, and not the languages they speak or the provision for these languages in public life in the USA.

Consider the following questions. What answers would you give?

1) Is the special place of the English in the USA really endangered?

Think about American films which portray American society. Whereas it might be true that many films do portray a multilingual, multiethnic society, how much of the storyline really centres on people's inability to speak English? Think of the Americans you may have met or know. If they speak a language other than English, does this in fact stop them being 'ineffective' communicators in English?

2) Are recent immigrants really resistant to learning English?

*What do you think would happen if most immigrants to the USA stuck together with their fellow countrymen? Would it really lessen their opportunities to speak English? When would they **have** to speak English?*

3) Would official English laws really promote national unity?

How would having just one language in a country make the country united? Consider the Polish situation – Poland has very small numbers of linguistic minorities, all of whom can speak Polish as well. Most immigrants learn to speak Polish reasonably well. Has the fact that the vast majority of people in Poland can communicate in Polish made it more of a united country?

4) Aren't "English Only" laws simply harmless symbolic acts?

If laws are 'harmless symbolic acts' then why bother passing them? How do laws affect people in an individual and a society-wide sense?

Now look at the answers to these questions provided by one website, Mass. English Plus (http://www.massenglishplus.org/content/Language_Rights/English-Only_Movement/EngOnly.html#Primacy):

1) Is the primacy of the English endangered?

No, the primacy of English is not endangered. It's already the de facto language of the United States. English is the de facto language of the United States. All public business, and most private business, is conducted in English. Foreign businesses who do business successfully in the United States require that their salespeople learn English. What we should support instead is the mastery of a second language or multiple languages. For American business to be competitive in our global market place, knowledge of other languages and cultures is crucial.

2) Are recent immigrants resistant to learning English?

No, newcomers recognize the primacy of English in our society and want to learn English. Over 95% of the people in the United States already speak English and over 85% are native speakers. Immigrants are experiencing a faster shift to English today than there was in prior generations. According to a 1985 Rand Corporation study, 95% of first generation Hispanic immigrants learn English; of their children, 100% speak English, and 50% speak only English. English Only legislation will not provide one penny towards the learning of English and will actually jeopardize the funding of bilingual education programs which help immigrants to learn English. There are thousands of people on waiting lists for English as Second Language classes around the country who want to learn English but cannot because classes are overfilled.

3) Would official English laws promote national unity?

No. Switzerland has three "official" languages and is a model of national unity, while Spain suffered three year bloody civil war when it had one "official" language. Social unity can only exist based on respect for people of different languages and cultures and not the repression of them. Language diversity does not cause social disunity. Similarly, monolingualism does not guarantee social unity.

4) Aren't "English Only" laws simply harmless symbolic acts?

"English Only" laws are not as innocuous as designating a state's official bird, song, or muffin. It is an attempt to limit access to governmental services for newly-arrived residents who may need language assistance in such crucial services as emergency medical help, child health immunization and public health and safety information, elderly and refugee services, employment and training information, etc.

How far do you agree or disagree with these views? Does it make sense for the United States to have one official language? If it does, how true is it that one reason for it to make English the sole official language is because English is under threat in the United States?