

Introduction

While the United States has no “official” language specified by the US Constitution, one could be forgiven for assuming that English holds this title, considering its ubiquitous role in American public life. A majority of US states, indeed, have codified the official status of English through constitutional and/or statutory means. State language laws as such will be the primary object of study in this project.

Sociolinguistics affirms that language does not exist in some theoretical vacuum; it carries social evaluations and entails real outcomes for real speakers of a particular language variety. Through a perspective of political linguistics, we will deconstruct the linguistic policy of the United States to understand how a multicultural nation ultimately abetted the hegemonic status of English in the US. We will look at how social evaluations and their legal manifestations played out over the history of the United States, and the effects (or lack thereof) of laws on American language communities.

I want to explicate the current state-level status of English as an official language, classify the laws by their level of potency and intention, and search for reliable data that can help us gauge the efficacy of specific state laws and compare them to other measures taken in multilingual countries.

Political Linguistics

Political linguistics is a subfield of sociolinguistics that studies the ways and extent by which governance structures influence or dictate the status and form of language used within its jurisdiction. In this context, language becomes a political resource over which actors can jockey for control. Once a political choice regarding language has been made, implementation will take the form of language planning, which can manipulate either the “corpus” or “status” of a language [2]. Such language planning measures will be designed by trained linguists acting in a clinical, technocratic capacity, but one must not forget the governmental power that lies behind the measures.

This is the framework in which we undertake this study. I hope to contribute knowledge in two ways:

1. Examining the form and effects of the various state language laws in the United States
2. Understanding how the United States became a monolingual political entity in the context of a multicultural population, without the presence of a federal language policy

Language Policy in the United States

[1] and similar summaries of US language law give a solid “legislative” history of the issue at both federal and state levels. I have not yet reviewed [3] but I believe it will be a good access point to primary sources. Recent activity may be less well recorded. Another problem is with follow through. Legislation tends to have a lot of coverage at the time of its debate directly prior to passage, when the issue is hot in the public consciousness. Once implemented, however, it is difficult to isolate the effects and outcomes of the policy, as the “buzz” has then moved on to new issues. This is my fundamental goal herein: to analyse the outcomes state-level laws have wrought for their citizens. This will be accomplished by the case studies discussed below.

State-by-State Results

One interesting case is California, where voters have approved two “pro-English” referendums in 1986 and 1998, despite the state’s massive Spanish-speaking population. It has one of the strongest official English laws in the country. This stance even affects the naming of babies: only the 26 letters of the English alphabet

are accepted on birth certificates, making it officially illegal to name a child in California “José” or “María” Larson [4].

The other end of the spectrum is a state like Illinois, where English is established as the official language to the extent that the *Cardinalis cardinalis* is established as the official bird, and the Monarch butterfly as its official insect. One would expect such a language policy to have little concrete effect.

References

- [1] Dennis Baron. *The English-only question: official language for Americans?* Yale University Press, 1992.
- [2] Louis-Jean Calvet. *Les politiques linguistiques*. Presses universitaires de France, 1996.
- [3] James Crawford. *Language loyalties: A source book on the official English controversy*. University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- [4] Carlton Larson. “Naming baby: the constitutional dimensions of parental naming rights”. In: *The George Washington Law Review* 80.159 (2011).