

Introduction

Although the United States has no official language specified in the US Constitution, one might easily assume that English holds this title, considering its ubiquitous role in American public life. A majority of US states have indeed enshrined the official status of English through constitutional or statutory means. State language laws are 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 US language communities.

I want to investigate the current state-level status of English as an official language, group the laws by their forms and effects, and locate reliable data that will help gauge the efficacy of language laws and compare them to other measures taken in multilingual countries.

Consequence

Second-language speakers of English continue to grow as a portion of the US population (Census). Some states, such as California, with an Official English law on the books, have large numbers of minority-language speakers whose perspectives must be considered vis-à-vis the majority language.

Furthermore, the election of Donald Trump as President has alerted public consciousness to renewed fears over immigration and the presence of foreign-language speakers in the US. **Liu14** finds that the national salience of immigration fears is one of the leading risk factors for the adoption of language legislation at the state level. Direct democracy procedures facilitate the expression of this “grassroots fears”, and states with such provisions appear to be more likely to pass Official English laws. likely to pass such laws.

Statistics

The percentage of Americans speaking languages other than English increased from 17.89% in 2000 to 19.89% in 2010.

Deficit

Questions

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 [**Calvet96**]. 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:

Language Policy in the United States

[**Baron92**] 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 [**Crawford94**] 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

Comparing the contents and outcomes of state language laws will shed light on what form effective political mandates will take.

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” **Larson11**.

Laws like that of Illinois sit on the other end of the spectrum, 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.