

# **BILINGUALISM AND INSECURITY MAKING ENGLISH THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE IS LARGELY AN ISSUE OF POLITICS, NOT EDUCATION**

San Jose Mercury News (California)

September 24, 1995 Sunday MORNING FINAL EDITION

Copyright 1995 San Jose Mercury News All Rights Reserved

**Section:** FRONT; Pg. 29A

**Length:** 752 words

**Byline:** Steven Thomma and Angie Cannon, Mercury News Washington Bureau

**Dateline:** WASHINGTON

## **Body**

---

WHEN SENATE Majority Leader Bob Dole recently joined the call to **make English** the country's **official language**, he tapped into a resurgent vein of **insecurity** about immigrants that has troubled the country since its founding.

From before the American Revolution until today, Americans have periodically worried that immigrants would maintain their own **languages** and split the United States into a Babel-like collection of tribes.

That fear has manifested itself in periodic backlashes, from Benjamin Franklin's warning that immigrants would never learn **English**, to World War I-era attempts to ban the teaching of German.

Now comes the latest move, to **make English** the country's **official language**, to require the government to print most of its documents in **English** and, in the **language** war's biggest battleground, to ban bilingual **education**.

Though popular - three out of five Americans support the **official-language** idea - the movement so far appears **largely** symbolic, a political salve.

Consider:

\* Federal measures pending in Congress would prohibit foreign **languages** in government documents but would **not** prohibit multilingual **education**.

\* Many of the state laws or constitutional amendments are toothless. Florida, for instance, amended its constitution in 1988 to **make English** the **official** state **language**, but its Legislature has never followed up with the laws needed to enforce it.

\* Dole himself sends mixed signals, saying he wants to end multilingual **education**, while also saying schools should continue programs to help immigrants learn **English**. **Education** experts say that is precisely what bilingual **education** does.

"This is an **issue** for politicians, but I don't think these laws will affect anything," said Christine Rossell, a political-science professor at Boston University who is writing a book on the **language** wars.

**Not** true, said Rep. Toby Roth, R-Wis., author of one of the **English-language** proposals pending in Congress.

## BILINGUALISM AND INSECURITY MAKING ENGLISH THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE IS LARGELY AN ISSUE OF POLITICS, NOT EDUCATION

While his proposal would allow local school districts to continue bilingual education, he said it would prohibit federal financing of bilingual education. It also would require that all government forms, including ballots, be printed only in English. It would not affect private businesses or private use of other languages.

For Roth and others, the English-first movement is critical to the future of the country.

For generations, he said, immigrants by choice or necessity learned English and turned the United States into a "melting pot." Now, he worries that too many immigrants can continue to speak their native languages in school, in stores and in relations with the government.

"We want to keep our nation one nation, one people," he said. "We need to keep our commonality, our common glue. We're losing that today, and we're losing it quickly."

But many others say the English-only crusade is much ado about nothing.

Historian Arthur Schlesinger, who agrees that English is necessary to keep the country united, disagrees that it is in trouble.

"More people in the world speak English today than ever before," he said. "The notion that it's so on the defensive in the U.S. that it requires statutory reinforcement seems ridiculous."

Rossell said the marketplace already has made English the official language. Census figures show that 97 percent of Americans speak English "well" or "very well."

In researching her book, Rossell found that Hispanic immigrants want to become assimilated just like earlier waves of immigrants. She cited a Rand Corp. study that showed most speak English by the third generation.

To those who question the need for bilingual education by arguing that previous generations of immigrants didn't have such help, advocates say that few immigrants in previous generations stayed in school very long - a high school diploma was rare and wasn't necessary to find a job, said Laurie Olsen of California Tomorrow, a non-profit group concerned about California's future as a multicultural state.

Moreover, Lyons said previous generations did experience multilingual education, at least until World War I.

"World War I and nativism killed off bilingual education," he said. "State after state repealed their laws. Some states made it a crime for some teachers to teach in a language other than English."

CHART: KNIGHT-RIDDER NEWS SERVICE

English spoken here

Sources: Census Bureau, Education Department, U.S. English

[950924 FR 29A 1; h. bar chart]

## Graphic

---

Chart

## Classification

---

Language: ENGLISH

BILINGUALISM AND INSECURITY MAKING ENGLISH THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE IS LARGELY AN ISSUE  
OF POLITICS, NOT EDUCATION

**Subject:** **LANGUAGE & LANGUAGES** (92%); MULTILINGUALISM (90%); IMMIGRATION (90%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (90%); FOREIGN **LANGUAGE EDUCATION** (89%); BILINGUAL **EDUCATION** (89%); PENDING LEGISLATION (88%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (78%); **EDUCATION** SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (78%); **POLITICS** (78%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (78%); HISTORY (75%); TEACHING & TEACHERS (75%); POLITICAL PARTIES (73%); POLITICAL SCIENCE (73%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (70%); WORLD WAR I (70%); SCHOOL DISTRICTS (68%); WRITERS (63%)

**Industry:** **EDUCATION** SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (78%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (70%); WRITERS (63%)

**Geographic:** BOSTON, MA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (94%)

**Load-Date:** October 24, 2002