

Will we ever get over our fear of foreign languages?

USA TODAY

April 6, 1995, Thursday, FINAL EDITION

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Section: NEWS; Pg. 12A; Debate

Length: 461 words

Body

Is the United States in danger of becoming a Tower of Babel?

Fearmongers peddling "official English" say it is. And they've persuaded 21 states and countless municipalities that they're right. All have made English their "official" language. Montana and South Dakota are the latest. Ten other states and Congress are weighing whether to join the parade.

Not a small accomplishment when your argument relies on fear, not fact.

In some places, official English amounts to little more than toothless pandering to anti-immigrant sentiment. In others, the laws are mean-spirited attacks on the rights of businesses to advertise as they see fit, barring non-English signs, or on services that help newcomers become full participants in society, eliminating English education programs. All give implicit license to other acts of discrimination.

And to what end? Fear of foreign speakers is older than the nation, rising in times of war, economic stress and increased immigration. Yet no calamity has occurred.

Benjamin Franklin saw it more than 250 years ago in Colonial Pennsylvania: "Few of the English understand the German language, and so cannot address them either from the press or pulpit." There were so many German speakers at the time of the Revolution that the Articles of Confederation were published in German as well as English. But German is gone.

A Marylander who sailed to New York in 1744 complained: "I never was so destitute of conversation in my life. . . . I heard nothing but Dutch spoke all the way."

Sojourner Truth, born a slave in a Dutch-speaking community two centuries ago, didn't know a word of English at age 10. Without benefit of official-language laws, she became a brilliant speaker and evangelist -- in English. Dutch died out.

In 1780, John Adams proposed an official academy to "purify, develop and dictate usage of" English. The Continental Congress rejected the idea as undemocratic and a threat to individual liberty -- sound judgment then and sound judgment today.

It's a disgraceful tradition: New York once barred 1 million Yiddish-speaking citizens from voting. California disfranchised Chinese. Nebraska, in an anti-Kaiser frenzy, expelled German and any other foreign language from its elementary schools.

And it's unnecessary. The vast majority of immigrants are assimilating quite nicely. More than 95% of first-generation Mexican-Americans are proficient in English; by the second generation, most have totally lost their parents' native tongue. Tens of thousands of immigrants are on waiting lists for overenrolled adult English classes.

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The urge to succeed drives most immigrants to learn English quickly. Laws that make the language "official" only deny our history and surrender to our fears.

Notes

THE EDITORIAL PAGE; Today's debate; OFFICIAL ENGLISH; OUR VIEW; 'Official English' is the latest overreaction to other languages. After 250 years, you'd think we learn.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (89%); **LANGUAGE** & **LANGUAGES** (89%); EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (78%); PRIMARY SCHOOLS (74%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (70%)

Company: CONTINENTAL CONGRESS (65%)

Organization: CONTINENTAL CONGRESS (65%)

Industry: EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (78%); PRIMARY SCHOOLS (74%)

Geographic: MONTANA, USA (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); MARYLAND, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (92%)

Load-Date: April 7, 1995