

# LANGUAGE LOYALTIES

\_\_\_\_\_ A Source

\_\_\_\_\_ Book on

\_\_\_\_\_ the Official

\_\_\_\_\_ English

\_\_\_\_\_ Controversy

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## The Costs of Monolingualism

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A society makes choices based on an implicit cost-benefit analysis. The assumption behind any cost-benefit analysis is, of course, that choosing a desirable course of action has consequences which are less desirable—often the need to give up an alternative choice which has its own set of benefits. The United States is currently grappling with decisions about language; members of groups like U.S. English argue that the social costs of tolerating the use of languages other than English, in terms of potential disruption and political factionalism, are unacceptable. Proponents of bilingual education argue that the social costs of low achievement by a significant minority of school children are too great.

While the proponents of U.S. English and of bilingual education can be seen as defending conflicting positions, we will argue in this paper that the conflict is apparent, not real. Furthermore, we will argue that both the proposal of U.S. English to establish English as the official national language, and the institution of bilingual education as it is typically practiced, entail additional serious costs not usually computed into the final amount of this particular societal decision—the costs of monolingualism. Perhaps some light can be shed on the consequences of either of these decisions by considering what basic psychological and linguistic research can tell us about the costs and benefits of monolingualism and bilingualism.

The classic characterization of American society is “the melting pot”—a merging of immigrant groups into a single, undifferentiated whole. A prerequisite to the melting has been acquiring English, an unsurprising requirement in a country where English is the language of government, of education, of business, and of daily life. What should surprise us is the willingness among immigrants, almost as strong as their tendency to acquire English, to lose their traditional

languages. Nonetheless, the United States is, at the societal level, staunchly monolingual. Legislating monolingualism as a requirement for citizenship could hardly have been more successful in creating a monolingual society than have been the unofficial economic and social forces at work.

It may seem odd to claim that the United States is one of the most monolingual societies in the world. What of the Hispanic population of the United States, currently 9 percent and growing? What of the millions of dollars spent on bilingual education, for the benefit of students from homes where Spanish, Portuguese, Vietnamese, and Chinese, or a myriad of other languages are spoken? What of the French-speaking communities in Louisiana and in northern New England? What of the Chinatowns in Boston, New York, and San Francisco and the Japanese communities in California? What of the immigrant communities of Cubans, Southeast Asians, Haitians, and Central Americans, all maintaining ties with their traditional languages? These groups look like cases of bilingualism within the melting pot.

Demographic studies, both current and historical, however, tell us that stable bilingualism is not characteristic of these groups. Only the old folks, the very young, and the recent arrivals, in general, speak these other languages; the school children and young adults have often switched to “dominance” in English. Once the parents’ generation becomes more comfortable in English—something that can happen in the course of the second generation—then the third generation is monolingual in English. This shift from bilingualism to monolingualism can be seen even in the current groups of immigrants to whom bilingual education services are widely available.

There is an unfortunate tendency to believe that this linguistic laissez-faire toward English monolingualism is the natural state, even perhaps the morally correct one, and that attempting to change its course would inflict large costs elsewhere. It is therefore important to understand the psychological and societal forces underlying this shift, for it has been the source of frustration and perplexity to many educators and policymakers who understand that monolingualism is costly both to the monolingual individual and to society. The rapid shift into English means that children who could have learned fluent Spanish or Chinese or Portuguese from their mothers and grandmothers are instead struggling to learn it, and often succeeding poorly, in high school foreign language classes.

Aside from the communication gap that is created across generations of immigrants by this shift, there are many other costs associated with the melting pot’s shift into monolingual English. Costs to society include:

- *Educational costs.* We need to devote teachers, school time, and part of the educational budget to foreign language training. American schools are notoriously poor in this field, and the resultant levels of fluency and correctness among foreign language students are much lower than among children who have learned these languages at home.

- *Economic costs.* American multinational businesses that compete abroad are severely hampered by the low numbers of Americans competent in languages other than English.

- *National security costs.* Millions of dollars are spent annually training foreign-service personnel, military personnel, and spies in foreign languages.

Costs to the individual include:

- *Time and effort.* It takes time, effort, commitment, motivation, and hard work to learn a foreign language in high school, and much less effort just to maintain a language already learned at home.

- *Cognitive costs.* There is some evidence suggesting that monolingual children are missing out on an opportunity to develop an early appreciation of language that results in better ability to perform well on tasks requiring linguistic and cognitive flexibility.

These are only some of the costs. They can be minimized by efforts to maintain the natural linguistic resources of bilingual youngsters, rather than standing by and tolerating the shift into monolingualism. So why does this shift occur? Why do people who can speak two languages tend to shift into the exclusive use of one? Is this shift inevitable, or are there certain circumstances that deflect this shift? Some answers to these questions can be found in the nature of bilingualism and the nature of language proficiency.

Strange as it may seem, there is no general consensus on the definition of language proficiency. Though there are many ways that people assess language, without a definition of proficiency it is difficult to know exactly what those assessment techniques are measuring. Those who study bilingualism are rather like four-year-old children just taught how to use a ruler—they can measure length, width, and height, but have no idea how to compute volume.

Typical approaches to assessing bilingual proficiency involve doing things like counting the errors made in the second language. This sort of approach is clearly inadequate; we know someone who speaks perfectly error-free Spanish, but can only carry on conversations about how much things cost and what size they are; we know someone else whose Spanish is chock full of errors, but who can talk about a wide variety of topics with anyone from a Puerto Rican taxi driver to the

professor of Romance languages at the university. Which of these has higher proficiency in Spanish? Clearly, a notion of proficiency that is based on getting communicative tasks accomplished has a certain merit, but we cannot totally ignore matters of correctness, either.

We favor a notion of proficiency very like that proposed by François Grosjean in his book *Life with Two Languages: An Introduction to Bilingualism*.<sup>27</sup> Grosjean assesses bilingualism functionally. Think of a chart of the tasks one faces in a given month: shopping, going to restaurants, talking and writing notes to your children's teachers, helping children with homework, having professional conversations, attending professional lectures, giving talks, writing letters, reading and writing reports, watching television, having family dinner-table conversations, keeping a diary, negotiating with plumbers, babysitters, gardeners, or repairmen, and so forth. Grosjean suggests that if any of these tasks is accomplished in a second language, you are a bilingual. The more tasks you can perform in either of two languages, the more proficient a bilingual you are.

But, of course, no one does all those things every day in two languages. In fact, for any particular bilingual, certain spheres of life (perhaps home and friendship) are in one language, while other spheres (perhaps work and public encounters) are in another. Furthermore, one's ability to function in any of those spheres in either language may wax and wane with circumstance and need. What this means is that, even for adults, proficiency in a language is not stable. Knowledge of a language and skills in using it are more like dancing the lead in *Giselle* than like the traditional notion of riding a bicycle. Not only are practice and conditioning crucial to being able to perform, but someone who has not played the role in a long while may even forget some of the steps! Attrition of language skills, even of first language skills when they are long unused, is a common phenomenon, now beginning to be documented by a number of researchers. We need to know much more about the circumstances that promote or prevent such attrition.

The fact that one's proficiency in a language, even a native language, can decline suggests that languages have to be used to be maintained. Thus, there is a personal cost to bilingualism: the psychological energy needed to keep using both the languages or to risk losing proficiency in one. It may be this cost, among others, that is reflected in the demographic trends toward monolingualism in the society.

There is another psychological cost for a bilingual individual who has to interact in an only partially bilingual society: the threat to hu-

27. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982.

man relationships, to self-image, and to personal identity associated with every choice of which language to use. The reason why language choice for the bilingual can be so difficult may be explained by one of the basic principles of social psychology—the convergence principle. The convergence principle states that we tend to shift our language style toward that of persons we like and admire. In everyday monolingual conversations between speakers of slightly different dialects or generations, one can see examples of the convergence principle at work, as the northerner starts shifting into a slight drawl with a southern friend or a grandparent adopts a grandchild's baby-talk words.

Consider the case of the perfectly bilingual Mexican American whose children start to speak English among themselves and eventually to their parents. The adults can stubbornly go on speaking Spanish, which their children understand, to maintain the children's proficiency in Spanish. But conversations where one partner speaks Spanish and the other speaks English are hard to keep going for long, as the convergence principle predicts. Not surprisingly, the parents typically give in, with the result that the children end up monolingual English speakers. Such parents can talk about the conflict—they would like their children to speak Spanish—but they do not want to sacrifice the familial intimacy, the freedom from conflict, and the convenience associated with acceding to their children's preferences. Costs to the family are reduced, but the children (and the society) pay the resultant costs associated with monolingualism.

Why do the children in such a family gravitate to English monolingualism? English, because it is the language of prestige and the majority culture; monolingualism, because for the child, as much as for the adult, maintaining two languages is harder than learning, maintaining, and using just one. In fact, the loss of one language under the influence of the other, a problem for adults, is particularly acute for children. Learning a second language takes so much energy for young children that it is difficult to maintain the first language at the same time without extensive support. The child who is still learning the first language, as five- and six-year-olds certainly are, is particularly susceptible to stagnation and decline. Becoming bilingual as a child is sure to involve some costs: perhaps a cost to the first language; certainly the cost of a period of inadequacy, discomfort, and low proficiency in the second language; and perhaps the cost of being judged a poor student because the assessment of intelligence and aptitude is made based on performance in a language not yet fully mastered.

How long, then, does it actually take to learn a language for a child or an adult? Anyone who has studied a foreign language knows it's a

painful process that can take a lot of time, effort, and willingness to risk feeling foolish in public. There is a myth that such is not the case for children, that "kids just pick up languages with no trouble." In fact, however, kids have *more* trouble than adults. If we take objective measures of how long it takes children and adults under similar circumstances to learn a second language, the adults are much faster. Children may appear to learn faster because they can function without knowing much, or because they pick up crucial social expressions quickly, or because their accents are better. But their knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, morphology, and discourse rules is much inferior to that of teenagers and adults after a similar interval of exposure to the second language. Moreover, the speed of second-language learning depends on many factors, including motivation, aptitude, and the setting in which the learning takes place.

And so, although there is a general belief that children just pick up a language and absorb it with no effort, in fact, it turns out that learning a language is hard for young children, hard enough that they will avoid it if possible and will take quite a long time accomplishing it if they cannot avoid it. Young children, as much as older ones, feel the "cost" of personal discomfort, social isolation, and lowered self-esteem associated with speaking the language of their interactants poorly.

Oddly enough, some researchers have suggested that there is a personal cost associated with becoming too fluent and proficient a speaker of a second language as well, especially for adolescents and adults in a submersion situation. This cost derives from the fact that one expresses cultural identity through language. One's way of speaking conveys personal information about ethnicity, geographical origin, social class, age, political leanings, and many other aspects of the self. This presentation of the self is, of course, different in another language. Fluent bilinguals often report having different personalities in their two languages, and studies have suggested that bilinguals show different responses in projective psychological tests, such as the Thematic Apperception Test, depending on which language is used.

The adult who learns a second language so well that he can "pass" as a native speaker is, in a sense, in a very risky situation. He is in danger of losing the identity that is well established in the first language, because he is being treated as a native of the second culture. Furthermore, since he is *not* really a native in the second culture, he is liable to make errors, both of self-presentation and in understanding others, that would be forgiven in a second-language speaker, but are not even recognized in a supposed native. One of the authors, for example, picked up and started using in Dutch an expression learned from some neighbors which turned out to be a sociolinguistic

"marker" for a working-class dialect. People who were inclined to accept the speaker as a native of the Netherlands would have made a serious error in judging social class and educational background. Protection against such misinterpretation is provided by an accent, a clear marker of "the foreigner," whose misuse of such expressions can be taken as an error or a joke. For the other author, who sounds like a native speaker of English, such protection was unavailable shortly after coming to the United States. He went into a delicatessen and ordered what he now calls "roast beef on hard," but with the last two words reversed, much to the shock of the butcher. It would have been more graceful with a thick accent.

Perhaps the greatest cost of bilingualism feared by Americans with a belief in the melting pot is not the cost to the individual, but the price paid by society as a whole. It is often felt that bilingualism costs too much at the societal level, where different language-based ethnic groups might weaken the status of English and cause the splintering of the nation. Those with such misgivings are worried that the United States might follow the footsteps of officially bilingual countries such as Canada and Belgium, where tensions among the linguistic groups abound. However, most political scientists who have studied the relationship between language and politics seem to agree that language is rarely the *causal* agent of such conflicts. Although language differences may serve as the focal point of the controversies, they usually just mirror the tensions already existent. Indeed, one can point to officially multilingual countries such as Switzerland, where there is very little conflict among the language groups. The crucial characteristic of tension-free bilingual nations is the expectation that it is normal for all citizens to be bilingual. In contrast, in tension-ridden bilingual nations, bilingualism at the individual level is considered abnormal.

How does the current status of bilingual education fit into this accounting of the costs of monolingualism and bilingualism? The federal government and the overwhelming majority of state and local boards of education have a very narrow view of costs. They do not consider the costs to society of losing linguistic resources. Their concern, in tune with the times, is with the amount of money spent on bilingual education programs. Bilingual education in its present form may be one of the greatest misnomers of educational programs. What it fosters is monolingualism; bilingual classrooms are efficient revolving doors between home-language monolingualism and English monolingualism. Were it not for the name, the champion of linguistic homogeneity on American soil could not have found a better friend than transitional bilingual education.

To be sure, there have been changes in the ways in which language-minority children have been educated in American schools. The old days of sink-or-swim submersion in regular classrooms with no special help are looked upon with almost universal shame and anger for their cruelty. The bilingual initiatives that were taken in the 1960s have certainly made the transition easier for students. But the bottom line of all of these programs has been an almost single-minded interest in the extent and the efficiency of English proficiency development.

Submersion is, for society, a cheap route to second-language learning (no special teachers, classes, curriculum, or programs required). But it is costly for the individual and may have associated with it a high risk of total failure (school dropouts barely literate in either the home language or English) and of educational delay. If a society decides it is important, for example, that non-English-speaking children be as good as English-speaking age-mates in reading, arithmetic, and other content areas, then allowing the non-English speakers to be mute observers while the English speakers learn the basic school skills may produce permanent scholastic problems.

Bilingual education or English as a second language (E.S.L.) programs in American schools were designed to minimize that risk in two ways: (1) by speeding up the acquisition of English and (2) by ensuring that the basic school skills and some content-area instruction go on while English is being learned. Submersion puts the entire burden on the child. Bilingual education and E.S.L. divert some of the burden to the schools. Research suggests that, particularly for children who are at some educational risk anyway—for example, children whose parents have limited schooling; children who arrive at school without the prereading or early reading skills typical of their middle-class peers; children from homes where economic and psychological stress may prevent parents from monitoring school progress, helping with homework, or contacting teachers—the likelihood of success, both in English proficiency and in school achievement, is greater if the schools discharge that burden effectively.

Even with the support of bilingual education or E.S.L., however, young children cannot be expected to learn second languages quickly. Research by Lily Wong Fillmore and Barry McLaughlin suggests that as many as half the non-English-speaking children in bilingual programs need more than three years of help before their English is good enough to understand reading books at their grade level or to understand teachers' talk during lessons on science or math. Some children were faster, but some who were potentially good students needed as much as four or five years of help with English before they could display their skills as learners. Such children, if placed prematurely in

mainstream classrooms, run the risk of being seen as slow learners, as dyslexic, as learning disabled, or as just stupid by teachers who are unaware that the students' control of English is simply inadequate. Surprisingly, such children are sometimes given I.Q. tests (based heavily on vocabulary knowledge—obviously a weak point for children who came late to English) and diagnosed as retarded on this basis! Clearly, if we are going to mainstream non-English speakers prematurely, we must at least postpone diagnosing, classifying, or grouping them based on their performance in their second language.

Bilingual education programs are doing precious little to maintain the native languages of the students. In a recent national survey of the goals of school districts with language-minority students, fewer than 10 percent of the districts cited native-language maintenance to be their goal. Furthermore, even in programs with a strong component for the development of native-language skills, students are quickly moved out into mainstream classes, often after one or two years in the program. For the majority of language-minority youngsters who go through the revolving door of bilingual education, what lies ahead is the shift to English monolingualism.

Strictly in terms of second-language acquisition, foreign language classrooms are less effective than submersion or bilingual approaches because the second language is spoken *only* in the classroom and not in the society. The age differences in speed of acquisition noted above for submersion settings are, if anything, even more pronounced in foreign language settings. In the 1950s American schools initiated a program called foreign language in the elementary school (FLES), which was abandoned after results came out suggesting that gains made during two to three years of FLES could be matched with a few months of instruction at the high school level. However, while relatively little foreign language proficiency was acquired by FLES students, they did evidently derive from the experience some interest in foreign language study. Since the abandonment of the FLES programs, the number of students taking foreign languages in high schools has dropped precipitously. The United States is the only technologically advanced western nation in which there is no requirement for foreign language study, even for academic-track students, in high school. A current, mild return of interest in foreign languages among high school students is creating a personnel crisis, since so few trained teachers emerge from a system that postpones serious foreign language study until the university. Achieving sufficient levels of proficiency in a foreign language to teach it can take several years, even for adults. Starting at age eighteen just does not give very much time.

A novel method for foreign language instruction to elementary school children was first introduced in Canada by Wallace Lambert

and associates in the Montreal school system. They taught whole classes of English-speaking children French simply by giving them a French teacher who taught the entire curriculum in French. In the beginning the children answered in English, but after a year or two were expected to use only French in the classroom. Such *immersion programs* have been tried in the United States as well. Immersion can be remarkably successful, but again, it takes several years for children to become fluent, it works faster with older than with younger children, and the levels of second-language skills achieved are rarely native-like. The primary problem with foreign language immersion programs seems to be that all the students in such programs are from the same, majority-language background. They have little or no contact with peers who speak the foreign language as natives.

There is an irony here, of course. Bilingual and E.S.L. programs were designed to get children who speak a language other than English into English classrooms as soon as possible. Because it requires effort on the child's part, and perhaps commitment and skill on the parents' part as well, to maintain and develop the native-language skill when the child is in an English-speaking classroom all day, there is a risk of losing proficiency in the home language. Even if the parents maintain bilingualism, we have seen above that their children are extremely unlikely to do so. Thus the children in our society who have the best bet at proficiency in two languages are being seduced by the school system into monolingualism in English, while the children who might be willing to work hard to achieve bilingualism are given instruction in foreign languages that is typically too little and too late to ensure adequate proficiency.

One novel method, called the *two-way bilingual program*, has been taking the best of both worlds from bilingual and foreign language education. In these programs minority students are provided the traditional form of bilingual education, that is, instruction in their native language, with gradual increments of English. The difference is that English monolingual students are placed in the same program and thus immersed in the foreign language spoken by the minority students. By the third grade, both groups of students receive equal amounts of instruction in English and in the foreign language. A major strength of two-way bilingual programs is that both groups of students act as linguistic models for each other. The chance of becoming proficiently bilingual is increased—in the case of minority students, through retention and development of their native language while acquiring English, and in the case of majority students, through exposure to real speakers of the foreign language.

Two-way programs can be found in many parts of the country, in-

cluding California, New York, Michigan, and Ohio. They take advantage of the local linguistic resources, and certainly must maintain flexibility to allow for fluctuations in these resources, such as new immigration. What differentiates these two-way programs from transitional bilingual education is their philosophy that the costs of monolingualism are far greater than the costs associated with bilingualism.

Perhaps it is inevitable that educators debate methodology when they are really debating politics. The current attack on bilingual education is seen as yet another example of a conservative administration's lack of commitment to minority programs and is counterattacked accordingly. What is truly saddening is that this political furor obscures any discussion of the costs or the benefits of bilingualism. Indeed, most proponents as well as opponents of bilingual education share the same long-term objective, which is English monolingualism. Program-evaluation research, difficult though it is to do and interpret, seems to show that bilingual education does work to teach English, but certainly not to create bilinguals.

Learning a second language is a tough task for children and adults everywhere in the world. Within the United States it is especially hard because of the remoteness of most Americans from any place where other languages are actually used. Americans lack the expectation that everyone will be bilingual. In fact, bilingualism is associated in this country with the lower classes and the immigrants, not with the educated elite. This association may be one of the reasons why we have defined the melting pot as monolingual rather than multilingual. As with any such choice, there are real costs involved.

## PART SIX

### International Perspectives on Language Politics

Do language differences inevitably spell political trouble? There is a widespread assumption that a nation cannot accommodate more than one language without paying a social price. The fear of balkanization—that bilingualism will divide and disrupt, fostering tribal loyalties and misunderstanding between groups—has generated much support for Official English. Many Americans look at bilingual Canada and see a country at war with itself. While language tensions are not yet acute in the United States, they reason, we would be wise to avoid policies that might encourage a similar situation here.

International analogies have played a starring role in the Official English debate. Unfortunately, they have been stock characters in a rather simple-minded melodrama. Consider, for example, the analysis of Senator Steve Symms, an Idaho Republican and a sponsor of the English Language Amendment. He blames Canada's troubles on the 1867 British North America Act, which gave coequal status (in principle) to the English and French languages. "More than a hundred years later," Symms explains, "the Canadian people suffer from a tragic split as a result of this legislated language difference." Presumably, bilingualism would have withered away without legal sanction. The senator goes on to warn: "Countless hundreds of thousands have lost their lives in the language riots of India. Real potential exists for a similar situation to be replayed in the United States."<sup>1</sup> By means of such fantasies, Symms reduces language diversity to an internal security threat. (Logically, his argument should extend to religious diversity, a larger factor in India's social turmoil since independence.)

One need not succumb to paranoia, however, to draw negative conclusions about bilingualism elsewhere. No American who has visited Quebec envies the seemingly pointless bickering between anglophones and francophones. Few of us would reject the advantages of a common language, spoken almost universally within our borders. Babel is a curse we can do without, and the experience of other nations may provide some guidance in avoiding it. But skimming superficial lessons can be dangerous—in particular, the conclusion that language differences are at the root of complex social and economic

1. *Congressional Record*, 98th Cong., 1st sess., Sept. 21, 1983, p. S12643.