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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0729j6h3>

Journal

Voices, 1(1)

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Publication Date

2013

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From Native Language to Foreign Language: Spanish in 19th Century Schools

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ABSTRACT

Bilingual education is not a recent issue in California. From the very beginning of the cultural encounter among Spanish and English speakers, we can find information in the newspapers about the situation. I will use 19th century articles from the Los Angeles Times and El Clamor Público to present different sides of the confrontation. I will also use school advertisements in order to understand which were the real educational options in Los Angeles in the middle of the 19th century.

Bilingual education has a long history in the U.S. From the Polish immigrants in Jamestown, Virginia that led a strike against the House of Burgesses in 1619 to obtain education in Polish (Orli 2008), to the passing of Proposition 227 in California in 1997 and the No Child Left Behind passed in the beginning of 2002 (Public Law 107-110), almost four hundred years of linguistic clash have passed.

This paper intends to clarify the situation of this linguistic encounter in California in the second half of the 19th century. To that extent, we will examine an article from the Los Angeles Times published in 1881 which represents a firm opinion against bilingual education. We will contrast it with another newspaper piece, this time taken from the Spanish periodical *El Clamor Público* from 1859. In addition, this second newspaper provides us with a considerable amount of school ads offering monolingual as well as bilingual education. We will examine them in order to understand what the real educational offering was in Los Angeles after the annexation to the United States. With all these elements, we try to shed some light on the topic of the history of Spanish in California.

It is estimated that more than one million students attended bilingual schools, from elementary to High School, in the 19th century (Zirkel

1977: 409). In 1837, Pennsylvania passed a state law that sanctioned the creation of German monolingual and English/German bilingual schools, and the situation was similar in Ohio. Rosa Castro Feinberg (2002) indicates that, in the period between 1837 and 1920, bilingual education was widespread in the U.S.: ‘Chinese, Japanese, German, Italian and French schools are established in California. Spanish is used as language of instruction in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas’ (35).

The conflict began in California with the annexation. The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo recognized the right of the Spanish speaking population to continue expressing themselves in Spanish and, more importantly, to have all laws translated into Spanish and to benefit from the presence of a translator in every Court of Justice. That clearly implies that the first Constitution recognizes the presence of Spanish speakers that would remain monolingual after the annexation.

The first Constitution of the State (1849) had similar characteristics to that of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo regarding the maintenance of this linguistic duality. The second Constitution, however, was not as generous. The first said, albeit in the Miscellanea Section: ‘All laws, decrees, regulations and provisions emanating from any of the three supreme Powers of this State, which from their nature require publication, shall be published in English and Spanish’ (Art. XI, Sec. 21). This first Constitution also recognized those Mexicans that had decided to remain in the U.S. under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and their right to vote provided that they were:

‘[a] white male citizen of the United States’ or ‘[a] white male citizen of Mexico, who shall have elected to become a citizen of the United States, . . . of the age of twenty-one years, who shall have been a resident of the State six months next preceding the election’ (Art. 2, Sec. 1).¹

Consequently, the first election that took place in the State of California was bilingual. This situation changed slightly in the new Constitution, as one year of residency was required to vote in the election.² The necessary period to elapse in order for one to be eligible for the office of Governor also changed: it was only two years with the 1849 Constitution (Art. 5, Sec. 3),³ and it increased to five years of both citizenship and residency under the Constitution of 1879 (Art. V, Sec. 3).⁴ It is clearly a guarantee of nativization. There is, however, a significant difference between these two situations: during the first period not only

was bilingualism accepted, it was also protected, contrary to the second Constitution which states that ‘. . . all the laws of the State of California, and all official writings, and the executive, legislative and judicial proceedings shall be conducted, preserved and published in no other than the English language’ (Art. IV, Sec. 24).

So, although the first Constitution guaranteed that all legal documents be written in bilingual form, it apparently did not work properly: Francisco P. Ramírez, on August 28, 1855, tells us in the editorial of *El Clamor Público* that justice is not bilingual, and that those that do not know English and/or are of Mexican origin encounter clear disadvantages:

Desde el año de 1849 ha existido cierta animosidad entre los Mexicanos y Americanos, . . . Si un Mexicano tiene por desgracia un pleito en las cortes de este Estado está seguro de perderlo. Es imposible negar esta aserción porqué (sic) conocemos a muchos infelices que así les ha sucedido apesar (sic) de los esfuerzos que han hecho para obtener sus derechos y su justicia imparcial (3).

Given that, were young individuals provided with the opportunity of learning one or both languages simultaneously at school? Bancroft (1888), in his *California Pastoral*, seems to not be very happy with the situation of schools in the period before the annexation. His messianism about education has no boundaries:

There were, indeed, none worthy of the name [schools] until a different race came into possession of this fair land, and broke that Shell that seem to bind every colony of the Spaniards still ruled by their descendants. The Californians of 1846 were scarcely more learned than those of 1769; they hardly knew enough fully to realize their ignorance. (521)

There are a considerable amount of ads about schools in *El Clamor Público*, representing both public and private institutions that seem to contradict Bancroft. But, apparently, his campaign was fruitful because, after a closer look at all the documentation, we can attest that public school instruction in Los Angeles in the late 1850s was carried out in English. The article ‘Examen de la escuela pública,’ published on February 28, 1857, clearly expresses this:

Los ejercicios fueron muy interesantes y los niños, casi todos de la raza española, manifestaron mucho adelanto en los varios ramos en que se les enseña, tales como deletrear, leer, escribir, contar y la geografía. Los padres de familia tendrán mucho gusto en saber los rápidos progresos de sus hijos, a pesar de que se les enseña en una lengua estraña (sic) (2, Col. I).

On the other hand, we can read from January 10, 1857, 'la escuela para niños españoles . . . no habiendo recibido la protección del gobierno, se continuará solo por el término de seis meses.' This 'escuela para niños españoles' was, however, bilingual in all its classes, as we can deduce from the note 'precios de enseñanza: por cada discípulo, en los idiomas español e inglés, escritura, aritmética' (2, Col.V).

The situation was quite different with private schools. We can differentiate two kinds of private schools: those sponsored by a religious organization and those that were not confessional. What all of them have in common is their bilingual teaching: all of them announce their classes in Spanish, English, and some in French or German. But the approach is not identical.

While some schools taught in both Spanish and English, as we can see mentioned from the school that 'el reverendo padre Raho abrirá . . . junto a la iglesia parroquial de esta ciudad' and in which 'Los principales ramos de enseñanza serán en los idiomas inglés y castellano y francés si se quiere' (Vol. IV, No. 27, 2, Col.V).

There were others, like 'La escuela católica para la juventud de ambos sexos' that had its classes in Spanish and taught English as a subject, as we can read from the list of subjects: 'Se enseñará la ortografía, geografía, aritmética, lectura, escritura, gramática, inglés, dibujo, etcétera.' However, the school states: 'Un establecimiento de esta clase debe recibir protección de los hijos del país, particularmente de los que deseen ser educados en su lengua nativa, como también a los que quieran aprender con perfección el idioma inglés' (Vol. I, No. 37, 3, Col. IV). Francisco P. Ramírez was indeed interested in the preservation of Spanish in the public sphere while his old cosmovision was being threatened.

Californienses! debeis persuadiros que la libertad de la imprenta es la mejor garantía para un pueblo, y que el nuestro mas que ninguno necesita de sus auxilios. Esta es una verdad comprobada y que no necesita de ejemplos para justificarla. . . . Hace mucho tiempo desde que intentamos publicar en esta ciudad un periódico en Castellano, pero las muchas

dificultades que se nos presentaron nos hicieron renunciar nuestra intencion: hasta que lo pusimos por obra y El Clamor Público es el primer fruto de nuestros trabajos. (Vol. I, No. 1, 1, Col. I).

What remained of Ramírez's intentions? His newspaper was not successful and, due to scarce patrons, it was forced to close after less than three years. Shortly thereafter, on June 28th, 1891, an editorial was published in the Los Angeles Times. Its title is vastly significant: 'One Language, One People' (p. 4), and it is related to the concept that establishes a one to one relationship between a nation and a country.

The article appeared on the second column and had no attribution, so we can conclude that it belonged to the editorial line of the periodical. It was an apologia of the merits of monolingual education in English and the demerits that could result from the implementation of bilingual instruction in schools and public institutions. Surprisingly, and after criticizing the habits of the non-English speakers, on the same page, in the fifth column, the reader could find a eulogy about the education with which the Japanese provided their young ladies. We can conclude, then, that the intentions of the editorial team are not to criticize all foreigners, but only those that were not as adaptable as they would like them to be. There is no explicit reference to Spanish speakers as those that are 'affecting the future of this country and the unification of its people,' but a glance at the 1850 Census shows that 91% of the population in the state of California declared itself as having a Hispanic origin, being from Mexico, Chile, New Mexico, Texas, etc. (Lamar Prieto 2012).

This idea of ignoring the presence of the Spanish speaking populations is endorsed by the invitation that the author extends to the inhabitants of the world: 'You shall unite with us in the work of building up a great and prosperous nation, occupying this wide continen (sic) from ocean to ocean and from the frozen zone to the smiling Gulf,' and continues 'And so we have this foreign element among us' (One language). The alterization of the Hispanic populations began with the refusal to acknowledge them: they were not there, the author seems to say. In parallel with that, the linguistic deprivation persisted: if the legal documents are not going to be available in Spanish, each and every individual will be forced to have more than functional English knowledge. Public schools had, then, a mission: to educate future citizens and, if possible, to educate them to be as uniform as possible.

As a conclusion, we can say then that there was a gap between what the public policies were regarding the maintenance of Spanish in the schools and what happened in reality. Although public schools should have respected the Constitution of 1849, it apparently was not observed, as we have seen in the various newspaper articles aforementioned. Schools teaching in English were funded by the Government, while schools who taught in Spanish ceased to receive funding. At the same time, education was provided in Spanish by private institutions, both religious and secular, in co-ed and all-girl systems. The Spanish language had then become, in the decade that elapsed after the annexation, in a private enterprise, a foreign language.

NOTES

1. Article II: Right of Suffrage, Sec. 1. 1849 Constitution.

Every white male citizen of the United States, and every white male citizen of Mexico, who shall have elected to become a citizen of the United States, under the treaty of peace exchanged and ratified at Queretaro, on the 30th day of May, 1848 of the age of twenty-one years, who shall have been a resident of the State six months next preceding the election, and the county or district in which he claims his vote thirty days, shall be entitled to vote at all elections which are now or hereafter may authorized by law: Provided, nothing herein contained, shall be construed to prevent the Legislature, by a two-thirds concurrent vote, from admitting to the right of suffrage, Indians or the descendants of Indians, in such special cases as such proportion of the legislative body may deem just and proper.

2. Article II: Right of Suffrage, Sec. 1. 1849 Constitution.

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4. Article V: Executive Department, Sec. 3. 1879 Constitution

No person shall be eligible to the office of Governor who has not been a citizen of the United States and a resident of this State five years next preceding this election, and attained the age of twenty-five years at the time of such election.

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