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Language in Public: The Place and Status of Spanish in the U.S. Public Sphere

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to bring to light some facts about the place and status of the Spanish language in the public sphere of the United States, that is, at the level of the government and of governmentally established institutions. Although the United States does not have an ‘official language,’ it is no stranger to language politics. In this brief essay, I will make cross-national and cross-state comparisons and pose some questions about role/place of language within the U.S.

1. **INTRODUCTION.** The goal of this paper is to present some facts about the place and status of the Spanish language in the U.S. public sphere, that is, at the level of the government and of governmentally established institutions. Although space restraints will not allow us to delve into ALL of the underlying reasons for this current status (which include a whole array of social, political, historical, cultural, and many other *-al’s*, issues), I will attempt to paint a clear picture of the present state of official linguistic affairs in the United States by drawing on some historical evolutions and cross-national comparisons, in addition to posing a few questions.

2. **ENGLISH: ‘OFFICIAL’?** Contrary to popular belief, the United States does not have an ‘official language’ at the Federal level, despite the fact that numerous proposals have been brought before Congress to establish one (U.S. Senate 2006). The country’s use of English is what is referred to as a *DE FACTO* national language, but its status is not legally equivalent to the case of Spanish in Spain or French in France, for example. Instead, each individual State government decides for itself whether or not it will adopt an official state language (or languages). Despite its technically unofficial legal status, however, English is by far the majority spoken language in the United States, with over 95% of the population claiming to speak the language ‘well’ or ‘very well’ (U.S. Census 2000).

So our first question becomes: what exactly does this mean for the other 380+ languages spoken in the United States? As Parodi has argued in various works, and as Villarreal mentions in her article in this volume, English is regularly maintained as the sociolinguistic ‘high’ (H) variant in U.S. diglossic situations, consistently being valued over the other *ETHNIC* languages spoken within the country. And, as these authors mention, one of these *MINORITY/ETHNIC* languages happens to be Spanish.

Now, this may seem ironic given that, as is the focus of several of my colleagues’ papers in this volume, over 12% of the U.S. population speaks Spanish; and that percentage increases to about half of the population (or even *MORE* than half) in the large metropolitan cities of the Southwest such as Los Angeles. Yet despite this numerical/statistical importance in terms of speakers, Spanish largely remains a *MINORITY/ETHNIC* language with no ‘official’ status.

3. *COMPARISON WITH CANADA.* If we compare the linguistic situation of our government to that of our neighbor to the north, Canada, we see a different option with regard to language status. Canada has two languages which are ‘co-official and equal’ at the federal level, (Canadian Official Languages Act of 1969/1988). Most importantly for our arguments here are the following clauses (found in sections 16–23 of the Act):

Everyone has the right to receive services from the federal government in his or her choice of official language;

Members of a minority language group of one of the official languages if learned and still understood (i.e., French speakers in a majority English-speaking province, or vice versa) or received primary school education in that language has the right to have their children receive a public education in their language, where numbers warrant (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages/Commissariat aux langues officielles).

Furthermore, what is particularly interesting is that Canadians are *PROUD* of being an officially bilingual country and consider it at the core of what it means to be from Canada, deeply rooted in the history of the land . . . and that is attested to by monolingual citizens as well! Take the following quote from Graham Fraser (2006), Canada’s Official Languages Commissioner: ‘In the same way that race is at the core of what it means to be American and at the core of an American experience, and class is at the

core of British experience, I think that language is at the core of Canadian experience' (Official Languages Act still needs work 40 years later).

What's more, these are not just the opinions of a select erudite few. In a nation-wide poll of monolingual English-speakers in 2002, for example, 91% of citizens supported the 'right to French language education outside of Quebec where numbers make costs reasonable,' up from 79% in 1977, (Parkin and Turcotte 2004: 6). In the same year, 2002, Anglophones showed support for federal French-language services to French-speakers living outside of Quebec: 76%. Overall, according to a 2006 poll, 72% of Canadians (monolingual and bilingual) answered in the affirmative to the question: "Are you personally in favour of bilingualism for all of Canada?" (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages/ Commissariat aux langues officielles). Furthermore, the youngest (18–34) age group from this study has ratings into the 80th percentile, demonstrating that linguistic attitudes are also moving toward increased support of bilingualism amongst the younger generations.

Of course we are glossing over the various historical movements in Canada which have pushed for English monolingualism, for Quebec's independence and French monolingualism, etc. However, the overarching national opinion of today has most certainly evolved over the years into one which promotes bilingualism and bilculturalism at the national, federal level.

4. **SAMPLE STATES: CALIFORNIA, LOUISIANA AND HAWAII.** Coming back home now, recall, as we mentioned earlier, that each state in the U.S. is free to make its own choice with regard to official language. Let us briefly compare Canada's linguistic evolution, just described, with that of a few states in the Union.

The area which is now California was governmentally monolingual in Spanish while it was part of Northern Mexico. This state of affairs changed to an officially bilingual one with the original California Constitution stating:

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. (1849, Art. XI, Sec. 21).

Fitzgerald (1993) even goes as far as to say that California 'embraced' bilingualism at this point in history (35).

By 1870, however, English-speaking Americans were the majority in California and the push for monolingual English began to gain support. In 1879, the state promulgated a new constitution under which all official proceedings were to be conducted exclusively in English, a clause that remained in effect until 1966: 'ENGLISH is the official language of the State of California' (Art. III, Sec. 6).

Most recently, in 1986, California voters added a new constitutional clause which does not actually say anything about Spanish, but rather about non-English-speaking individuals in general: 'A person unable to understand English who is charged with a crime has a right to an interpreter throughout the proceedings' (Art. I, Sec. 14).

The point of outlining Canadian and Californian progressions with regard to opinions on language at the governmental level has been to illustrate extreme, night-and-day contrasts and divergences. While Canada appears to have embraced (and continues to embrace) bilingualism in connection with the history and culture of its citizens, California seems to have pushed against (and continues to push against) that same notion in the case of Spanish. This can easily be seen at the national level as well with the termination of the Bilingual Education Act at the onset of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Interestingly enough, though, note that this monolingualism is not universal across the United States. Here are two examples:

Louisiana, formerly part of Nouvelle France, was purchased by the United States in 1803. Currently, the two 'de facto administrative languages' of the Louisiana State government are English and French, despite the fact that less than 7% of the state's population speak French/Creole French.

A similar situation is seen in Hawaii, which has two official state languages: English and Hawaiian. Although the number of speakers has grown over the last two decades due to initiatives by the University of Hawaii and other organizations, it is still the case that less than 0.1% of the state's population speaks Hawaiian. Yet, it maintains a legal, governmental status.

A major question then becomes, simply, *WHY?* Why have states like California gone the way of OFFICIAL, GOVERNMENTAL monolingualism/ monoculturalism while Canada and states such as Louisiana and Hawaii have gone the way of OFFICIAL, GOVERNMENTAL bilingualism/biculturalism? In other words: why is it that Spanish has the status (or lack thereof) that

it has in California and the Southwest, while French has the status it has in Canada and Louisiana, and Hawaiian has the status it has in Hawaii?

5. CONCLUSION. The above discussion may urge one to imagine a context where official bilingualism would actually be immediately relevant. Just as a simple example, in some of my own research I have looked at instances of direct contact between English and Spanish in the U.S. in calls for emergency service (more commonly known as ‘calls to 911’). In these calls, there exists a massive preference for English-language service: think of the institutional opening ‘911, what is your emergency?’ (Raymond 2014). Call-takers/Dispatchers seem to do anything and everything in their power to preference an English exchange with the Caller, contacting an outside Spanish interpreter only a last resort option. In this instance, one can clearly see how this linguistic hierarchy of English over Spanish is negotiated amongst speakers in real time and in a real context. But this is only one example where the availability of governmental service in Spanish can be the difference, literally, between life and death.

So bring our discussion toward a conclusion, note the following statement from the Canadian Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism:

A bilingual country is not one where all the inhabitants necessarily have to speak two languages; rather it is a country where the principal public and private institutions must provide SERVICES in two languages to the citizens, the vast majority of whom may well be unilingual.

Pros and cons will inevitably exist in any official system—as is always the case in politics, you can never please everyone—and, of course, Canada is no exception (Fraser 2006). The crucial difference, though, is that while our neighbor to the north has given historically rooted bilingualism a chance (and it seems to be working), we in the United States, on the other hand, have EXPLICITLY denied Spanish a place at the institutional level, decidedly taking steps through the years to stomp out the very notion of governmentally sanctioned, governmentally promoted bilingualism.

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