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Historical Orientations to Language Policy in the United States

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Introduction

Over the past several decades, there have been persistent concerns about the official status of English in the USA and, simultaneously, about the preservation of languages other than English. These concerns echo those that held center stage at the outset of the 20th century as well as some that were raised even during the era of English colonization before the founding of the Republic. A historical review of language planning and policy formation and an analysis of their ideological underpinnings may be helpful in understanding current debates over language policy in the USA.

This LPREN Brief discusses the orientations of U.S. language policy from the colonial period to the present, showing the relation of language policy to changing sociopolitical trends. It analyses language policies orientations as characterized by promotion, expediency, tolerance, restriction, and repression.

Understanding U.S. Language Policy Orientations

Some of the confusion that occurs in popular discussions about language policies in the United States results from dichotomizing choices regarding governmental recognition and support for languages, as if they involved only either-or choices between English and other languages. There remains some disagreement over the fundamental historical orientation of language policies in the USA. In the most comprehensive analysis of formal policy stances that can be taken by a state or by the federal government, Kloss (1977/1998) argued that tolerance has been the primary policy orientation throughout most of American history and that this orientation reflected the thinking of most of the founders (see also Crawford 1992a, 1995; Heath, 1976a). Certainly, throughout much of American history, there was considerable tolerance toward European languages. However, this tradition of tolerance all but disappeared during the World War I era when an epidemic of anti-foreign language sentiment and legis-

lation was provoked in a climate of xenophobia, jingoism, and super-patriotism (Tatalovich, 1995; Toth, 1990; Wiley, 1998a, 2000, 2013, 2014). Table 1 provides highlights of the development of language policy in the United States since the colonial era, illustrating both tolerance and restriction of various languages.

The orientation of official U.S. language policy has changed over time, in relation to social and political trends, and with varying impacts on language communities. Classifying changes in policy is therefore challenging. In his classic, *The American Bilingual Tradition*, Kloss (1977/1998) developed a useful schema to categorize various types of official language policies or language laws. Given that the definition of language policies can be expanded beyond *official*, to include *implicit* or *covert* policies, the major categories of Kloss's framework can be adapted and more broadly applied to encompass these categories (see Macías & Wiley, 1998; Wiley, 2000). The following schema, adapted from Kloss, allows for a classification of policies based on their intended purposes as well as their consequences. The emphasis is best placed on consequences because some consequences are unintended.

Promotion-oriented policies involve the use of governmental/state resources as part of an active governmental plan to further the official use of a language or languages. Much of the promotion of English has resulted from implicit policy, such as institutional practices that are conducted through the medium of English, such as the government's printing and distribution of laws and records in English and its conducting nearly all governmental business in it.

Expediency-oriented laws or policies designate a weaker version of promotion-oriented policies but differ in purpose because they are not intended to enhance the use of a minority language. They allow the government to accommodate minority languages in the short term to facilitate educational and political access and to guarantee legal rights (e.g., by providing for court interpretation). Ironically, much of the controversy

regarding bilingual education in recent years has been based on a confusion of expediency with promotion. Expediency provisions for Title VII transitional bilingual education and bilingual ballots have often been attacked by English-only advocates as if they were promotion-oriented in their intent.

Tolerance-oriented policies are characterized by the significant absence of state interference in the linguistic life of the language minority communities. They leave language minority communities to their own devices to maintain their ancestral languages without any expectation of resources and support from the government. From the late 1600s until World War I, many German Americans experienced relative tolerance toward their language, the German-language press, and their efforts to educate their children using German-language and bilingual instruction (Kloss, 1977/1998; Toth, 1990; Wiley, 1998a). Areas of the country with language minority immigrant communities today often rely on privately funded and community-funded weekend schools in efforts to maintain or restore heritage languages. Even in periods of linguistic tolerance, however, efforts to promote their heritage languages have not generally achieved long-term success when language minorities have had sufficient opportunities for contact with the dominant society.

Restriction-oriented policies are those that make social, political, and economic benefits, rights, and opportunities conditional on knowing or using the dominant language. Language restrictions usually target communication in work-related or official domains. Despite evidence for tolerance-oriented policies (Kloss, 1977/1998), there is also considerable evidence for restrictionism since the colonial period. Restriction-oriented policies were a major feature of territorial language policies during the period of U.S. national expansion (Macias, 2000; Wiley, 1998b, 1999; Wiley & Lukes, 1996). Historical examples of restrictive language policies have often been justified as leading to a greater good for those targeted by them. World War I-era English-only restrictions on education and Americanization efforts were rationalized on that basis (McClymer, 1982). More recently, California's Proposition 227 and Arizona's Proposition 203 sought to severely limit access to bilingual education, and were similarly justified. The most widespread period of restrictionism occurred during the World War I era when most states passed restrictive and official English-only policies (Kloss, 1977/1998; Tatalovich, 1995; Toth, 1990; Wiley, 1998a, 1998b, 1999). Despite their noble sounding intentions to promote access to English, restrictive English-only school policies have often had negative consequences for the acquisition of English literacy (Spring, 1994; Weinberg, 1995; Wiley, 1996b).

Repression-oriented policies involve the self-conscious attempt to exterminate minority languages. There is a thin line between restrictive policies and repressive policies, and restrictive poli-

cies become repressive when they are linked to deculturation or linguistic genocide. Early examples include forbidding the enslaved Africans to use their native languages and the subsequent imposing of compulsory illiteracy and ignorance codes (see Day, 1985; Hernández-Chávez, 1994; Spring, 1994; Weinberg, 1995).

After the Civil War, the USA became more repressive in imposing English and Anglo culture on American Indians. A policy of *coercive assimilation*, intended to expedite deculturation and pacification, was implemented during the 1880s when the Bureau of Indian Affairs instituted a system of English-only boarding schools (Crawford, 1995; Spicer, 1962, 1980; Weinberg, 1995; Wiley, 1998b, 1999). Indian customs were to be destroyed. Indian deculturation was accompanied by patriotic indoctrination designed to instill allegiance to the USA. To achieve these ends and diminish the authority of their families and tribal communities, authorities wrenched Indian children from their families at a young age (Spring, 1994; Weinberg, 1995; Wiley, 1999).

In the Midwest and other regions of the country during World War I and the early 1920s, the imposition of English-only policies was accompanied by widespread persecution of German speakers. Many cases were reported in which ministers were whipped, beaten, or tarred and feathered by mobs for preaching sermons in German; schools and churches were pillaged, and German books were burned (Luebke, 1980). Some 5,000 German-speaking Mennonites fled the country to Canada (Wiley, 1998a). The impact of restrictive language policies and widespread persecution on the ethnic identity of the German American population had instantaneous and long-term effects. For example, a comparison of the 1910 (pre-war) and 1920 (post-war) U.S. Census shows a surprising drop in the number of people claiming German birth—from 2.3 million people in 1910 to fewer than 1.7 million in 1920 (Conzen, 1980; Wiley, 1998a).

Conclusion

Questions of language policy may be approached solely from a linguistic point of view. A principal argument here, however, is that language policies, whether official, implicit, or covert, are used to influence and control social behavior. The ideology of English monolingualism presumes a contest between English and other languages in which it is assumed that only one language can prevail. Given that metaphors of social conflict dominate contemporary debates about language policy, it is impossible to avoid the social and political implications of policy prescriptions. The metaphor of conflict precludes a longstanding missed opportunity in the USA, namely the development of a more widespread capacity for bilingualism (Wiley, 1999).

Table 1. Historical Highlights Regarding the Status of English and of Efforts to Restrict Other Languages

British Colonial Period to 1789. English achieved unrivaled dominant status among European languages in the American colonies. Tolerance toward other European immigrant languages was differentially applied. English-only practices were imposed on enslaved Africans, and, beginning in the late colonial period, compulsory English illiteracy and ignorance statutes were imposed on enslaved peoples in the southern colonies. During this period, American Indians were generally regarded as belonging to separate—albeit subordinate—nations with whom treaties could be negotiated; however, missionaries attempted to promote English among some eastern Indian nations, and as early as 1775, the Continental Congress allocated funds for Indian education with the intent of pacification.

1789 to 1880. The USA sought territorial expansion in which many language minority peoples were conquered or annexed. The federal government opted not to designate English as the official language and, despite some nativist stirrings, there was generally great tolerance for the use of European immigrant languages. Compulsory illiteracy laws for African Americans persisted in southern states until the end of the Civil War in 1865. Florida and the vast Louisiana Territory were incorporated, half of Mexico was conquered, and Alaska was purchased. Territorial language policies varied as the federal government exercised considerable central authority. English education remained a tactic for the economic destabilization and pacification of Native Americans where they were in contact with Whites. Some Native Americans, most notably the Cherokee, ran their own schools and achieved impressive levels of native language literacy and biliteracy.

1880 through the 1930s. Between 1880 and the end of the Spanish American War, the United States added Hawaii, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico to its empire, with primacy placed on English and with attempts at language restrictionism, especially in Puerto Rico. On the U.S. mainland, unprecedented levels of European immigration

persisted until the early 1920s. English increasingly became the official language of schooling in most states. During and immediately following World War I, restrictions were placed on teaching German and other European languages other than English. For example, in many states it became illegal to teach foreign languages until the sixth or eighth grade. The Supreme Court, in *Meyer v. Nebraska*, ruled against an English-only restriction on the use of foreign languages in Nebraska schools, but the ruling also affirmed the state's right to mandate that English be the common and official language of instruction. Restrictions on the use of instruction in native languages persisted through the period, although some of the more stringent policies directed at Native Americans were relaxed during the 1930s.

World War II to the Present. Desegregation increasingly took center stage among social issues following World War II. During the mid to late 1960s, language accommodations were seen as partial remedies for problems of equal educational opportunity and political access. Restrictive requirements were relaxed and some provisions made for the use of other languages, particularly in education and in voting and legal contexts. The *Lau v. Nichols* Supreme Court decision acknowledged that schools had to provide some proactive means of teaching English and making the curriculum comprehensible. The 1970s witnessed a mixed reaction to policies of linguistic accommodation. The trend since the 1980s has been toward official recognition and protection of English, and restrictionism with minimal linguistic accommodation toward other languages.

For elaboration and discussion of specific case histories see Baron, 1990; Crawford, 1992a, 1992b, 1995; Huebner, 1987; Kawamoto, 1993; Kloss, 1977/1998; Leibowitz, 1971, 1976, 1980, 1982, 1984; Lubke, 1980; Macías, 2000; Sato, 1985, 1991; Schiffman, 1996; Spicer, 1962, 1980; Tamura, 1993; Wiley, 1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2013, 2014.

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