

As English as Apple Pie: The English language as an (un)American symbol

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Abstract

This article builds on previous studies that examine the subordination of Spanish and other minority languages in the modern American context. In this paper I aim to show how the issue of language manifests itself in public discourse regarding citizenship. I maintain that English is promoted not only as a symbol of prestige, but also as a fundamental element in what it means to be “American.” This ideology is therefore used to marginalize and justify the discrimination of individuals who speak languages other than English. This paper features a case study that analyzes the portrayal of the phenomenon by one mainstream Arizona newspaper, the *Arizona Daily Star*, focusing on the controversial citizenship ceremony conducted mostly in Spanish that occurred in Tucson in July of 1993.

Introduction and Rationale

Although the U.S. Constitution does not discuss language rights or designate an official language, as Hernández-Chávez (2001) states, “[T]here can be little question that the United States has always had an official language and that this language is English” (142). In this paper I will examine the roots of this attitude that have led to the pervasive ideology that considers English the national language of the U.S. I will then analyze the ongoing language panic that seeks to further elevate and legitimize English, thereby subordinating minority languages and the people that speak them. I will examine this phenomenon through recent public discourse in southern Arizona concerning language vis-à-vis citizenship.

Why is this study important? Foucault posits that discourses are social practices within social orders expressed by individuals. Through the expression of these discursive behaviors, ideological practices are reproduced and reaffirmed (as cited in Santa Ana 2002: 253). This discourse is important to examine because the dominant ideology represents an attitude that has been normalized in our society to the point that it appears “natural.” These ideologies serve to determine power relations, and as history teaches us, those in power rely on the promotion of a certain ideology to maintain cultural and linguistic hegemony. As I will argue, the association of English as “American” and languages other than English as “un-American” is reproduced and reaffirmed in public discourse. Consequently, language policy that favors English speakers is widespread and adamantly defended, augmenting asymmetrical power relations and distribution of resources among non-native English speakers. Santa Ana (2002) argues that the extensive negative portrayal of Latinos in the news media has had considerable effect in shaping public opinion, resulting in the passage of three anti-Latino referenda in California in the 1990s. These measures denied Latinos, both “legal” and “illegal,” immense opportunities and state resources including access to social services, affirmative action, and bilingual education. Tollefson (1991) leans on Chomsky’s concepts regarding the manufacture of consent in order to sustain existing power relationships in society (11). As Santa Ana demonstrates, the media plays a major role in manufacturing consent. It is therefore imperative to study critically the discourse regarding Latinos that major news sources, such as the *Arizona Daily Star*, privilege in their reporting.

In this study I argue that the same hysteria regarding immigration in California exists here in Arizona and has led to increased scrutiny over language policy. In the last decade Arizona, like California, has made an increasing effort to enact policies that limit opportunities for linguistic minorities. One such measure was the passage of Proposition 203 in 2000 that severely restricts bilingual education in public schools. Support for the measure was garnered under the guise of promoting English as a source of national unity and economic opportunity in the U.S. Tollefson, however, asserts that national languages in fact control and limit access to power. “The adoption of a national language depoliticizes one variety [in this case English], which is declared to be the symbol of all people (the nation). Resistance to the national language is therefore seen as opposition to national unity” (9). While some groups rely on the propaganda of unity and opportunity to further English, Tollefson notes that they ignore structural obstacles that are inherent in the language policies they espouse. Such policies require immigrants to learn English in order to achieve social mobility, yet they fail to acknowledge factors such as economic conditions that make this goal unattainable for immigrants. These policies do not offer

viable options for most immigrants to learn English. Under current policies individuals with limited English proficiency are often relegated to the periphery to work in menial jobs as inferiors to those who do in fact speak English. As Feagin comments in the foreword of *Brown Tide Rising* (2002), “At this point in U.S. history, it is not clear whether the majority of white Americans will join in the effort to build a multiracial democracy, or will instead retreat into a new American apartheid” (xiv). The data I am going to present support an increasing trend toward the latter.

Citizenship - fact, myth and social reality

In this section I will examine the current requirements for naturalization. I will analyze this practice in an effort to reveal the underlying ideology it presupposes. Then I will examine insights gleaned from scholars who have written about citizenship and the role of language.

The INS website (www.usaimmigrationservice.org/c.htm) outlines the general naturalization requirements that include age, residency, physical presence, good moral character, attachment to the Constitution, language, knowledge of United States Government and History, and oath of allegiance. The text describing language requirements reads as follows:

Applicants for naturalization must be able to read, write, speak, and understand words in ordinary usage in the English language. Applicants exempt from this requirement are those who on the date of filing:

- have been residing in the United States subsequent to a lawful admission for permanent residence for periods totaling 15 years or more and are over 55 years of age;
- have been residing in the United States subsequent to a lawful admission for permanent residence for periods totaling 20 years or more and are over 50 years of age; or
- have a medically determinable physical or mental impairment, where the impairment affects the applicant’s ability to learn English.

These requirements confirm that English is indeed considered fundamental to being a full, *legal* participant in society (as those who are not citizens are required to possess the I-551, *Alien* Registration Receipt Card, to be legal). Even though the Constitution makes no mention of an official language, this policy makes English the only language for those who want to enjoy the full protection and benefits of the U.S. Constitution. According to Tollefson, “To restrict minority languages to specific domains is to legitimize the

domination of specific groups and to institutionalize the marginal status of some members of the population” (202). By negating minority languages as appropriate in gaining U.S. citizenship, this policy effectively institutionalizes English as *the* legitimate language for full members of the United States.

In *Brown Tide Rising*, Santa Ana offers an insightful analysis of citizenship in the dominant American discourse. The language used to discuss citizenship reveals the predominant underlying attitudes about what it means to be (and not be) a citizen. The term “naturalization” illustrates the notion that only those born in the U.S. come by their citizenship in the “natural” manner. Santa Ana elaborates:

Two indications of the cultural centrality of citizenship in modern nation-states, and the United States in particular, are the bureaucratic complexity and ritualized ceremony required to naturalize someone. Such is the characteristic of this wholly contingent notion, which, with no small irony, is taken to be an “inalienable” element of the character of U.S. citizens [...] Outsiders are not integral to the function of the body and represent either threats to the well-being of the body politic or resources to be consumed. Lastly [...] to be a U.S. citizen, in the eyes of those who possess this civic “birthright”, is to be fully vested in humanity, while not being a citizen means not being fully human. (276)

While much public discourse regarding immigrants addresses their legal status, this same discourse overlooks the notion of “real Americans” as a social construct that has long dictated who has a legitimate place in society. U.S. citizenship, at its inception, was created by the framers of the North American Revolution. The legacy of citizenship in this country has favored white men. In 1790 most of the U.S. population was ineligible for the full benefits of citizenship. Among those excluded were blacks, Indians and women (Santa Ana 2002: 276).

Since the eighteenth century a much greater portion of the population has gained the right to citizenship. Although such inclusivity may appear positive, Giddens (1987) argues that “as citizenship rights reflect power relationships, the state can manage its population, particularly its role in labour...[l]anguage policy is a form of disciplinary power. Its success depends in part upon the ability of the state to structure into the institutions of society the differentiation of individuals into ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’” (cited in Tollefson 1991: 207). Based on this theory, current citizenship language requirements serve as an arm in the big sorting machine that assigns individuals their roles in society based in part on language.

As Giddens signals, our democracy depends on a system that assigns leaders and followers. This system relies on differences such as language. Yet many activists promote

linguistic and cultural assimilation for all. This notion that a country is made strong by its homogeneity is discussed in T.H. Marshall's comments on the evolution of British citizenship (as cited in Santa Ana 2002: 278). In the early stages of British citizenship, those considered "true" citizens had the education and economic resources that identified them with elite British culture. Class rather than birthplace determined legitimate citizenship, as working class individuals were not considered citizens. Here it is helpful to examine the idea of the classical republic or nation-state. According to Santa Ana, the original concept of citizenship stems from this model that separates individuals into two distinct classes. In the fourteenth century citizens were the oligarchic few while the denizens were the majority of the people. This medieval dichotomy, says Santa Ana, "still fits with the metaphors conceptualizing nation and race in contemporary American public discourse" (279). While it would seem an overt citizen-denizen system has since been replaced by a democracy, structural policy retains certain would-be denizens as marginal citizens due to, among other factors, language.

As Hill notes in "The Racializing function of language panics" (2001), language panics result from perceived threats to cultural hegemony. The ideology that considers cultural and linguistic assimilation essential to national unity and prosperity look, therefore, to difference as weakness in our national fiber. According to Santa Ana, "immigration is perceived as the greatest threat to the nation-state" (279).

Santa Ana employs excellent examples to illustrate the propaganda the immigration foes use to rationalize their views. He cites from Peter Brimelow's (1995) *Alien Nation: Common Sense about America's Immigration Disaster*:

One right that Americans certainly have is the right to insist that immigrants, whatever their race, become Americans. The full force of public policy should be placed behind another 'Americanization' campaign [...] All diversion of public funds to promote "diversity," "multiculturalism" and foreign-language retention must be struck down as subversive of this American ideal [...] the English-language requirement for citizenship should be enforced and the various recent exceptions such as for spouses and the elderly, abolished. (Brimelow cited in Santa Ana 2002: 264-67)

Local groups as well as legislators on Capitol Hill share Brimelow's view, as we shall see later in the case study on the 1993 protests in Tucson.

The title of Brimelow's book itself is all the more subversive when you examine writers who have deconstructed the notion of "common sense." In *Language and Power* (1991), Fairclough emphasizes "common sense" assumptions are the result of power relations of which most people are not conscious and therefore do not question. Certainly Brimelow's views support the status quo. The strong language in his text preys on the

“common sense” of U.S. citizens to convince them of the evils of cultural diversity including multilingualism.

Lippi-Green (1997) notes that the majority of people living in the U.S. are immigrants, or descendents of immigrants. Still, as promoters of a long legacy of assimilation policies, the majority seeks to maintain this trend. “Language often becomes the focus of debate when these complex issues of nationality, responsibility, and privilege are raised. English, held up as the symbol of the successfully assimilated immigrant, is promoted as the one and only possible language of a united and healthy nation” (217).

John Fonte, as noted by Santa Ana, presented his views in 1997 to the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Immigration. His philosophy echoes Brimelow’s “our way or the highway” sentiments under the following pretext, “Citizenship means full membership in the American republic. The goal of the naturalization process that grants citizenship to U.S. immigrants should therefore be Americanization [...] Americanization means adopting American civic values and the American heritage as one’s own. It means thinking of American history as “our” history, not “their” history... There’s no reason today’s new arrivals can’t learn to adopt America’s heritage, and patriotic assimilation demands it” (Fonte in Santa Ana 2002: 280).

Fonte’s (1996) article “Anti-Americanization” is a diatribe that accuses the Clinton government of weakening the nation through its “anti-assimilation” policies. His statements reflect certain viewpoints that I have discussed earlier. In his opposition to bilingual education Fonte exclaims, “If the students ace a history test in Spanish and flunk it in English, it’s not going to do them any good when they go to get a job” (49). This utterance acknowledges the lack of legitimate spaces for Spanish in our society. According to Fonte, clearly no desirable jobs consider Spanish an esteemed or useful skill.

Fonte refers to the effort to increase available languages in which to take citizenship tests as the “dumbing down of citizenship” (49). His depiction clearly equates the use of Spanish, Korean, and Vietnamese (and/or their speakers) with a lack of intelligence.

In this section about citizenship I have discussed a seemingly contradictory national agenda. On one hand, assimilation is touted as necessary for national strength and equal opportunity. At the same time differences, such as racial and linguistic differences, have historically made our country strong with a system that depends on such distinctions to determine the most and least desirable workers in order to get all the jobs done. How can these ideas, inclusion and exclusion, *both* be considered racist? In practice these two views achieve the same result by delegitimizing minority languages and the people that speak them.

Language subordination

In this section I will present theories of language subordination and the policies that support them. I will then use this theoretical base to analyze the discourse of articles regarding citizenship in the *Arizona Daily Star*.

In her introduction to the model of the subordination process, Lippi-Green discusses the effects of a “standard language ideology:”

When persons who speak languages which are devalued and stigmatized consent to the standard language ideology, they become complicit in its propagation against themselves, their own interests and identities. Many are caught in a vacuum: when an individual cannot find any social acceptance for her language outside her own speech communities, she may come to denigrate her own language, even while she continues to use it. (66)

The data I have presented thus far indicate that there is indeed a dearth of legitimate spaces for minority languages in the United States.

Lippi-Green created a model of language subordination after studying reactions and actions of dominant institutions “when they have perceived a threat to the authority of the homogenous language of the nation-state” (67). In her model, language is subordinated via the following methods: language is mystified, authority is claimed, misinformation is generated, non-mainstream language is trivialized, conformers are held up as positive examples, explicit promises are made, threats are made, and non-conformers are vilified or marginalized (68).

As indicated by the title of an article by Hernández-Chávez (2001), “Language Policy in the United States: A history of cultural genocide,” language attitudes are reflected in the policies that govern this nation. He notes that the Official English movement that engaged in heavy activity in the early 80s (and continues to gain momentum) has come as no surprise. As a consequence of some linguistic civil rights gains, xenophobic individuals and groups have responded with the fight for and approval of English-only laws in several states. The “this is America, speak English” mantra of these groups has surged from a sense that the Anglo cultural and linguistic majority is threatened by “special rights and privileges” that minority groups have achieved. According to Jane Hill these language panics are, above all else, about race. She considers race “the single most important category of social organization in the United States” (245). Accordingly, language panics are one of the characteristic discourses of racist culture as it has developed in the United States. Hill notes that language panics are characterized by their excess of public attention and hyperbolic quality over seemingly obscure technical matters (249). In the case of the citizenship ceremony in Tucson, her theory certainly applies. The ceremony that involved

76 people eligible for citizenship, because part of it was delivered in Spanish (as allowed by US laws), created a certain hysteria that attracted the attention of Capitol Hill and resulted in intense scrutiny of citizenship laws to insure there would never be “another Tucson.”

Tollefson’s distinction between neoclassical and historical-structural approaches to language planning is extremely useful in understanding how a policy that flaunts inclusion can be, in reality, exclusive to certain people. In the neoclassical approach the focus is on motivation in which the onus of learning the language is placed on the individual with little regard to external factors. The historical-structural framework examines instead the “social, economic, and political forces that impose the specific alternatives available to the individual” (39). In historical-structural analysis one looks at “the role of language in the processes which structure societies, and the ways in which planning can affect these processes” (37). We will now turn to the application of these theories in the context of southern Arizona in 1993.

Language Panic at Home: The 1993 Tucson Protests

In this next section I will examine coverage of the citizenship ceremony conducted mostly in Spanish that took place in 1993 in Tucson, Arizona.

Methodology

The corpus of articles I studied includes all articles in the archives of the *Arizona Daily Star* concerning the July 2, 1993 citizenship ceremony conducted mostly in Spanish in Tucson. I was able to find two editorial articles and six news articles that directly address reaction to the ceremony, while I found additional articles that convey public sentiment about citizenship and language issues in general.

The Event

On July 2, 1993, 76 people were “naturalized” in a citizenship ceremony at City Hall in Tucson. The ceremony was believed to be the first conducted in a language other than English. The rites were delivered in Spanish for the 75 Mexicans and one Peruvian who were exempt from the requirement to demonstrate English proficiency. Only the oath was recited in English as required by federal law. The event provoked expressions of protest from English-only groups and people of the community. The event also attracted attention of policy makers in Washington DC. In response to the ceremony, Bill Emerson, a Missouri Representative, filed a bill to ban the use of languages other than English in citizenship ceremonies. According to information in the *Arizona Daily Star*, the event also

inspired Toby Roth of Wisconsin to file a bill that requires English exams for everyone applying for citizenship (Holland 1993: 1B).

Analysis of articles

In the month following the controversial ceremony, the *Arizona Daily Star* reported on legislation prompted by the Tucson incident. In an article entitled “INS rite in Tucson raises stir, English-only bill surfaces on Hill,” Judy Holland reports, “US English, the advocacy group that aims to make English the country’s official language, plans to pound on lawmakers’ doors after the August recess to ensure there ‘will be no more Tucsons’” (1B). As Hill notes, language panics are characterized by frenzy and incongruent logic. Whereas the 76 immigrants speak Spanish everyday (most likely in jobs that allow for the dominant culture’s lifestyle), the panic only occurs when a “privilege” is associated with speaking Spanish. The sudden realization that someone who speaks Spanish everyday can have the same privileges and benefits as an English-speaking citizen causes concern, especially when “endorsed” and legitimized by the INS. Tucson could easily be considered a bilingual city by any informal measure given its considerable population of Spanish-speaking inhabitants. Yet with immigration from Mexico consistently reported as a problem in the mainstream news media, it is no surprise that this language panic occurred.

In the *Arizona Daily Star* article “Groups seek to halt ritual for citizenship, mostly Spanish ceremony riles English-only backers” printed prior to the ceremony, Robert Park, the chairman of Arizonans for Official English is quoted as saying, “The duty of the government is to promote assimilation, not accommodation.” Bill Anderson of U.S. English added that a “dangerous precedent” was being set for other immigrants who will want services in their native languages (Tully 1993: 1B). In Lippi-Green’s model, those who are non-conformers are vilified. These men claim the INS officials in Tucson are breaking with their civic duty of enforcing assimilation. This suggestion indicates they believe immigrants have no right to use their native languages.

The Associated Press article published July 2, “Citizenship ceremony will be in Spanish despite protests,” reports that the Tucson ceremony prompted a California legislator to send a letter of protest to Attorney General Janet Reno, asking that she demand Tucson officials conduct the ceremony in English. The legislator gained the support of 24 members of Congress who also signed the letter, demonstrating that even elected officials, those in a position of authority, were against this “attack on American values.” In the same article a spokesman for the INS in Washington confirmed the situation was lawful. He added, “by doing this, it may be more meaningful to them. It isn’t normal, but the waiver is available to them” (1B). By saying this ceremony is not *normal*, it trivializes the participants’

right to a ceremony in their native language. The article concludes with comments by an English First member. George Tryfiates claimed, "This is not a welcoming ceremony. It is a divisive ceremony. It's sending the wrong message" (1B). One can infer that "the wrong message" is that they should embrace the right to use hear and use their native language in an often-emotional ceremony.

In the article printed July 3, "76 take U.S. oath in controversial Spanish program," Borden states that official English activists demonstrated at the ceremony and distributed fliers to the new citizens as they left. The text in the fliers included statements such as "It may give you the impression that ours is a bilingual nation which it is not. Beware of those who try to persuade you otherwise. They will lead you down the path to poverty" (1B). These statements are easy to identify in Lippi-Green's model of subordination. There is a promise implied that if they simply conform they will be accepted and have more opportunities. These supposed evil people who support their right to the ceremony in Spanish are clearly vilified.

The January 27, 1994 article entitled "U.S. English gives \$5,000 To Nogales group" raises a crucial issue that should be at the heart of the public discourse on immigration and language. The article explains that Project Citizenship is a program in Nogales, Arizona that prepares legal residents for the citizenship exam. When U.S. English publicly criticized the infamous citizenship ceremony in Tucson, the director of Project Citizenship told them "to put their money where their mouth was." The Nogales program had more than 500 legal immigrants in the community eager to improve their English, but inadequate resources to provide language education for all of them. U.S. English donated five thousand dollars to fund additional classes to help the Spanish speakers prepare for the citizenship exam (Meissner 1994: 1B). Finally, the paper published an article that exposes the structural obstacles in our society that make it very difficult for most immigrants to learn English. The majority of the population demand immigrants learn English. How should adult immigrants go about learning English? Following the neoclassical approach to language policy, this question is rarely addressed in public discourse. While supporting language policies that do not recognize time, economic, or social constraints, those in power put the onus on the immigrant to figure out how to learn English.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Study

In this paper I attempted to show the way power and language are inextricably linked in our society and the essential ideology that guides them. I examined the role of language in citizenship, in the policies of our government and the role of public discourse in maintaining the status quo. I discussed a theoretical framework in which to examine a

language panic and its implications. Finally, I studied an acute episode of a language panic regarding language and citizenship in Tucson. I conclude that current language policy in Tucson reflects the ideology of the dominant linguistic and cultural group. This group's rhetoric appeals to "common sense" assumptions when they demand immigrants learn English. The caveat is that they rarely create language policies that make learning English realistic. Immigrants are caught in a catch-22. Most immigrants come to the country to earn a decent living. Because of the way our society is structured, they almost always end up in low-paying jobs with little room for advancement. To advance they must learn English. To earn that decent living they have no time and little money to invest in the countless hours necessary to learn English.

This study is a preliminary attempt to understand the social injustice that is often concealed or diverted in public discourse regarding language subordination. To better understand the complexities of the situation in Tucson, it is imperative to gather data from many different news sources and research their political slants and motivations. Also, it would be advisable to investigate school policies and curricula and speak with community members of diverse backgrounds. While reading Tollefson's *Planning Language, Planning Inequality* I realized the powerful impact of hearing the life stories of people like Binh Nguyen. While the mainstream media tends to brand certain immigrants with undesirable labels (the one I encountered most often in my research was the degrading term *illegal alien*), there is great potential for hearing the real impact of language policies on people with names, jobs, families, hopes, and dreams. Regretfully our society "prosper" while their stories go untold. If we are to create a true democracy, it is time to listen to their stories.

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