

In Defense of Unity & English-Only: On the Early Political Battles to 'Unite' the Nation

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Early developments within the English-only movement draw our attention toward the naming and defining of community/national identity amidst an ever-changing national landscape. Efforts from proponents to legislative an official language, gave way to the development of a political/legal rhetoric seeking to define "us" as a nation. This essay argues that early attempts toward uniting the nation around a common language actually produced a fragmented vision of national identity steeped in racial, ethnic and linguistic homogeneity.

Introduction

Tracing back to the writing of the Constitution, the framers took no action to "promote" or "protect" any official language. No evidence exists to suggest the framers believed a monolingual society or one with an official language could serve as society's social glue. The speaking and publication of both public and private documents in multiple languages, is as old and "American" as the nation itself. Whether it be in reference to the Louisiana constitution, which allowed for laws to be published in French, or California and Texas, which allowed the publication of laws in Spanish, bilingualism has always occupied a heavy presence within American political development. Moreover, it was not until 1906 before there existed an English-speaking, reading and writing requirement for naturalization, instead, it was sufficient to pledge allegiance to the Constitution.

The question of how or what variables unite us a nation is one with considerable baggage, noting such past legal and political efforts against miscegenation for instance, strivings toward unity have come at the great expense of those classified as "them" or "foreigner."¹ However, as America's first wave of English-only laws began to arise, proponents committed themselves to a brand of argumentation that linked English-only with "American" ideals and principles, whereas community became defined, articulated and legislated around singular qualifiers, ones that offered no room for languages other than English to receive equal protection under the law. While social and political fragmentation is nothing new to the study of American history and politics, scholarship that investigates the relationship between community and fragmentation from a rhetorical perspective, particularly regarding English-only, are not as frequent. Here, the focus adopts a rhetorical analysis of rhetoric and community, discussing how early English-only proponents fostered state communities of racial and linguistic fragmentation, drawing largely upon the scholarship on rhetoric and community from Roderick P. Hart. In doing so, this essay will draw upon Hart's exploratory discussion on the relationship between hate, rhetoric and community, summarized neatly as "uncommunity." While Hart provides the foundation for this relationship, this essay will expand upon his notion to argue that proponents of America's first English-only movement committed themselves to a body of rhetoric dedicated to racial, ethnic and linguistic division, or, "uncommunity," despite their overall rallying cries for a "united" society.

These states do not just simply occupy the status of the nation's first and second wave of English-only laws; yet, these early arguments from proponents possess a timely and timeless rhetorical dimension that sees frequent usage throughout this movement, that is, the naming and framing of community around certain, rather exclusionary qualifiers, huddled around the maxim of "one flag, one language."² This argument will become

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more transparent through an analysis of early proponents argument at the state level before concluding with two recent examples of this topical and rhetorical recurrence.

On Immigration and a Uniting Language

As the pattern goes historically, “language laws, sentiments, and policies have been inextricably bound to immigration patterns and laws since colonial times,” as Bill Piatt reminds us, whereas these “foreigners” and their language became the objects of great legal/political suspicion.³ Generally linked to increasing numbers of “foreigners” entering the country, English-only debates oftentimes transform into crusades to keep “America” “America.” The political development of the English-only movement, or, how “foreign” languages such as German became objects of fear, debate, and legislative restriction, can be traced to the 1700’s. In a 1753 letter written to a friend, Benjamin Franklin famously expressed his fear in the rise of the German language, specifically in Pennsylvania, noting of course, the number of street signs in German without English translation. Germans living in Virginia for example petitioned the 1795 state General Assembly to print laws in German for those who have not fully grasped English. Although this initial petition was tabled in committee, an identical bill was introduced the same year, yet this time, the notion advanced to a voice vote where it was ultimately defeated by a 42-41 vote.⁴ Although the motion was narrowly defeated, this legislative attempt for bilingualism was enough to disturb those like Franklin.

The fear of German, as expressed by Benjamin Franklin, was unfortunately widespread and shared by other lawmakers throughout the colonies. As the pattern goes historically, once the German population in America began to rise, as did the level of paranoia over the “foreign” language they spoke. Their rise in population, totaling eight million German immigrants and their children, compared to the two and one half million English immigrants and their children in 1900, soon unleashed an unprecedented legislative assault toward curbing the use of German in various settings.⁵ The paranoia that accompanied the fear of a “foreign” takeover gained momentum throughout the 1900’s, particularly pertaining to the belief that German immigrants would obscure “American” identity and erode national unity by their “refusal” to speak or learn English. Buying into this fear doctrine, one Oregon law required “foreign-language” newspapers to publish English translations to ensure no plots against the nation were under discussion and that close tabs could be particularly kept on German Americans.

The Congressional endorsement and passage of various naturalization laws included numerous measures aimed at “uniting” the nation. One 1916 law called for the deportation of all “aliens” who did not apply for citizenship within three years, whereas a 1917 amendment to the Espionage Act required every “foreign-language” paper to submit English translations of all stories covering the war. Moreover, the Revenue Act of 1918 doubled the income tax rates on “nonresident aliens.”⁶ This stream of laws designed to promote “Americanizing” new immigrants only increased over time and by state. With the widespread belief held by many lawmakers and their constituents that the nation’s unity and identity was in jeopardy, America’s “first wave” of English-only laws ironically began in Nebraska, just four years before the *Meyer* decision.

Of considerable importance to the discussion at hand stems from the problem of community in the United States. This problem, notes J. Michael Hogan, “is rooted in racial and ethnic differences,” whereas defining both who and what does and does not fit the build of the “American” community continues to transform over time and place.⁷ For instance, before U.S. citizenship is granted to new immigrants, they must fulfill the requirements established by Congress in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). With some exceptions, once

these requirements are met, you are federally classified as a United States resident. However, while on one hand the federal government recognizes you as a member of the U.S. community, because of different conceptual and definitional relationships at the state level, proponents argued otherwise on the grounds of the false nature of the federal governments association. With this line of argumentation offered at the state level, English-only proponents offered an alternative definition regarding whom and what requirements must be satisfied before admittance is granted to each states community of residents. As a result, state-led English-only efforts introduced new renderings of community and “American” identity, as the debates ahead will illustrate.

War Time Hysteria: The Nebraska & Illinois Story

Unfortunately, policy disputes regarding matters of race, ethnicity, immigration, and language are nothing new in the United States. Although race and ethnicity can be arguably added, for Noam Chomsky, “questions of language are basically questions of power,” whereas debates over official language policies are representative of such power struggles and illustrate Hogan’s belief of a racial and ethnic dimension in community formation.⁸ Although English was not the first nor only language heard by Europeans when making landfall upon the shores of the United States, this has not deterred efforts by many lawmakers to argue or pair the English language with “American” heritage and identity. Depending upon where in America various European “immigrants” made landfall, Spanish, along with various Native American languages could be heard. Regardless of the approximate location and people where European “immigrants” encountered, English was by no means the “dominant language” nor the nations “native tongue.”

Prior to World War I, German Americans were the largest language minority group in the nation, drawing much suspicion and distrust. Once America entered World War I, this suspicion and distrust immediately turned to bigotry against the German population. This heightened level of paranoia led to legislative efforts to eradicate everything symbolizing the German threat, including efforts to curb the use and spread of their language. For many first-wave English-only proponents, the German language threatened the fragile unity of each states community, arguing that “the United States has turned some crucial corner, that the very fabric of our society has begun to unravel” at the hands of a growing German population.⁹ For early English-only proponents, the German language placed much strain on the “American” community, severely challenging the current demographic qualifiers placed around proponent’s notions of community.

Proponents who backed the nation’s first state-level English-only law all possessed much of the same belief regarding what they perceived to be the problem with Nebraska’s community. Throughout the arguments backing a 1919 measure to name English as Nebraska’s official language, proponents followed J. Michael Hogan’s observation on unity and community, noting, “fragmentation of community poses a serious threat to the American democracy, perhaps even a threat to the survival of freedom itself,” whereas English-only proponents sought such legislation as a means to “unite” us as “Americans.”¹⁰ With the goal of English-only in mind, the thirty-seventh session of the 1919 GOP controlled Nebraska General Assembly sought legislative actions to curb the use and teaching of “foreign languages,” chiefly German. To begin, the General Assembly passed Senate File 15, a law ending the previous practice of printing county board proceedings and land sells in German, Swedish and Bohemian in newspapers statewide. Next was Senate File 237, an open-meeting law requiring discussions of “political or nonpolitical subjects or questions of general interest... be conducted in the English language exclusively,”¹¹ only excluding religious gatherings and lodges. From there, the state legislature passed by an overwhelming majority, Senate file 24, a statute mandating that no individual, teacher or otherwise, teach any

subject to any person in a language other than English. One exception that was soon made to this law, which later became the object of the *Meyer* case, allowed languages other than English to be only taught after a student passed the eighth grade but outside of this addendum, it was otherwise illegal and subject to criminal charges and/or fines.

These severe constraints placed upon the learning and speaking of “foreign” languages were just the beginning. At the center of the 1919 Nebraska Constitutional Convention were two proposals, both legislating English as the state’s official language. With Proposal 77 for instance, the insistence upon Nebraskans to speak/use the “American” language became an issue of debate. For example, Proposal 77 argued that the:

Ability of the people to freely communicate with and understand each other is essential to a republican form of government, and a common language being therefore a necessity to the people of this state, the right of the people to such a common language shall never be denied or in any way impaired or abridged. To that end, the American language—the language of the Declaration of Independence, of the Federal Constitution and of this Constitution,—is hereby declared to be such common language and the official language of this state, and all public proceedings, record and publications shall be in such language and no other language in any school, public or private, until such persons shall have attained the age of fourteen years and shall be able to understandingly read, write, and speak such American language.¹²

Like modern-day arguments in defense of English-only laws, most, if not all, disregard the existence of over twenty languages before European “settlers” came ashore. Instead, much effort is made to construct English as the language of unity, yet, evidence to this unifying force remains to be seen, proven or found. Nonetheless, while Proposal 77 did not carry enough supporters, it then went to the Convention floor for debate, seeking a more favorable outcome.

What is most interesting of the arguments waged in defense of this law pertains to its both timely and timeless appeal, that is to say, despite being 1919, proponents overall rationale and body of rhetoric find frequent usage today. If nothing else, the nation’s first wave of English-only argumentation introduced us to the constitutive element of defining and sustaining community along racial, ethnic and linguistic lines.¹³ For example, the proposal’s chief architect, Walter Anderson of Lancaster County, offered a line of argumentation that has become all too familiar with the English-only debate. In his words:

If a majority of the Convention thinks we should call it the English language rather than the American language, I will agree with that, but I like to call it the American language, and I like to call this country America, and I like to call the flag the American flag, for I am for one country, one language and one flag, and I want to be for the American language.¹⁴

Again, steeped largely under the false assumption that English once existed as, or is in danger of no longer being the language of the “American” community, contributes to the growing belief that linguistic homogeneity ensures national unity. The spectacle that has become linguistic diversity and community formation, as Jack Citrin observes, “has sparked insecurity about national cohesion and fostered a movement to designate English as the official language of the United States,” as the nation’s first-wave of English-only debate unveils.¹⁵ With just Proposal 77 alone, many legislative debates erupted over “uniting” the national community under one official language. Continuing in this homogenous fashion, what these debates illustrate is the contradictory framing of “community” by proponents against the larger national ideal of equality for all.

In a shocking occurrence to Anderson, who believed his efforts were for the benefit of the greater communal good, his proposed amendment drew many dissenters who instead favored Proposal 326, which did not include the word “only” when referring to the use of English. One dissenter, John Wiltse, argued against Anderson’s entire body of claims, noting, he saw “no reason why, at this late day in the history of our country, we should undertake to change the name ‘English language’ to ‘American language,’” later adding, “there is no such

thing as the American language unless we refer to the language of the American Indian.”¹⁶ Further adding to his dissent, Wiltse voiced his skepticism regarding the age limit imposed under Anderson’s amendment, believing it would impair a child’s development and proficiency in a language other than English. The dissent voiced by Wiltse, who opposed restricting the private use of “foreign languages,” yet approved the documentation of public records in English, was representative of those who lead efforts to defeat Anderson’s amendment and the ultimate success of Proposal 326. This passage however did not quiet the storm, for Proposal 326 was rather vague, simply stating, “the purpose of the amendment is to insure to the youth of the state a knowledge of the language in which the spirit of our institutions is expressed and to promote true Americanism.”¹⁷ English-only proponents, not satisfied with this, tried again during the fortieth session of the state General Assembly.

Senate File 160, an amendment to legislate English as the only language of instruction in all schools, a move the previous Constitutional convention failed to do, took center stage in 1921. While the proposed amendment had its dissenters, it was not enough to stop its passage. Marking the nation’s first English-only law, the Nebraska General Assembly passed a comprehensive act making English the state’s official language, banning “foreign” language instruction before ninth grade and “protecting the use of the English language in all public gatherings.” To illustrate the change in law, section four of what is now referred to as the Siman Law, read:

It shall be unlawful for any organization, whether social, religious or commercial, to prohibit, forbid or discriminate against the use of the English language in any meeting, school or proceeding, and for any officer, director, member or person in authority in any organization to pass, promulgate, connive at, publish, enforce or attempt to enforce any such prohibition or discrimination.¹⁸

In what laid the groundwork for later legislative actions seeking to evoke the same “American” spirit of establishing an official language, Nebraska provided the impetus for states like Illinois to follow. This crusade to speedily “Americanize” immigrants is best described by John Higham. He posits, “when neither a preventative nativism nor the natural health of a free society seemed sufficient to cope with disunity, a conscious drive to hasten the assimilative process, to heat and stir the melting pot, emerged.”¹⁹ This rise in anti-“foreigner,” pro “American” sentiment became adopted next in Illinois, as English-only proponents felt the assimilation process for new immigrants was in need of legislative assistance.

For the many who believed in the unifying effects of the English language by insisting upon official language declarations and other measures to mitigate against the supposed community threats posed by “foreigners,” raises the question introduced by Roderick Hart, is it “possible to have community without hate?” For Hart, he believes words have consequences, whereas the rhetoric of hate displays feelings of antipathy toward a selected person or group, much like those targeted by restrictive linguistic laws. Through Hart’s eyes, each community contains an “uncommunity,” or, “an assembly of the befouled and besotted who have heard the Word and rejected it. They have mindfully chosen a course different from our own and pursued it with abandon. The uncommunal are not quiet in their protests.”²⁰ In a similar Nebraska fashion, members of Illinois’ “uncommunal” supported and sent a message to its German immigrants, one that was laced with the ingredients of hate, intolerance and antipathy.

Inevitable within political campaigns launched and/or supported by the uncommunal, are unmistakable characteristics. These campaigns, notes Roderick Hart, involve “society’s leaders get[ting] us to take risks we otherwise would not take. They make us see the Other in his full depravity, and they embolden us a result.”²¹ For Illinois English-only proponents, the quest toward achieving “one nation indivisible” began with “rooting out alien conspiracies.” By means of declaring “American” as the official language, notes James Crawford, efforts to reclaim what it means to be a part of the “American” community ignited much debate.²² Once the language threat

was minimized, the nation could rid itself of its looming community perils and become a “united” states, so the argument went.

In 1923, Illinois followed Nebraska in both spirit and body of argumentation, whereas Senate Bill 15, introduced by (D) Frank Ryan of Cook County, sought to establish “American” as the official language of Illinois. Speaking on behalf of his bill, Ryan explained, “this is one country, with one flag, and should have one language,” later adding, “it is time we should teach more Americanism than we do now,”²³ expressing an all too common sentiment found throughout the country during this time. Fearing that Illinois would continue to lose its sense of community, Frank Ryan argued the merits of his bill, keeping in the forefront, the devise nature “foreign” languages contributed to the states as well as the nation’s social and political unity. In his words, “this bill calls for the American language [and] that is all. It wants to educate us Americans in the American language, and not in any other language. As stated a moment ago, the language and the flag go hand in hand,” believing that one nation should only have one flag and one language.²⁴ While offering no evidence to support his claims of “foreign” fragmentation, Ryan was able to see the passage of his bill in both chambers of the Illinois State House, marking Illinois, in 1923, the second state in the nation to pass such a law.

The belief that national cohesion or a sense of national community can only be achieved through some degree of homogeneity, linguistic in this case, becomes a reappearing theme argued by proponents. Across both space and time, whether it be amidst World War I or otherwise, during times of war, both pre and post, J. Michael Hogan explains, “wars invariably have led Americans to question their nation’s identity and purposes.”²⁵ As part of this quest for a common identity, both state and national sentiments surged in support of the establishment of a single language community. Because of the deadly efficacy hate rhetoric possesses, along with the sweeping uncommunal sentiment of the time, while Nebraska and Illinois believed they have taken the proper steps toward community unification, it was now time for the Congress to do the same.

One year after the passage of Illinois’ declaration of “American” as the state’s official language, the United States Congress enacted the most restrictive immigration law on record, the National Origins Act of 1924.²⁶ This policy imposed quotas against immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, totally excluded Asians while favoring immigrants from northern Europe and England. The National Origins Act went to great specificity when defining their restrictions. For instance, those identified as “non-quota” immigrants included wives and unmarried children (under 18 years of age) of US citizens, residents of the Western hemisphere, religious or academic professionals, and “bona-fide students” under 15 years of age. Those who fell outside this category were defined as “quota immigrants” and as the title suggest, were subject to annual limitations. For quota immigrants, as the law explained, preference would be given to family members of US citizens and to immigrants who were skilled in agriculture. As a nation in fear of the “foreign” threat, limits became imposed to not only restrict their physical movement, but also their linguistic movement as well.

Movements to restrict “foreign” languages and “foreigners” altogether reached a historic watermark during the 1920’s, particularly pertaining to German Americans. Marked by landmark legislative moves in Nebraska and Illinois, and later at the federal level with the passage of the National Origins Act, the movement to reclaim the “American” community against the German threat was considered a success. While German Americans were no longer viewed as constraints upon national unity, the 1980’s introduced two new groups of suspicion, Latino and Asian immigrants. Fueled by the belief that Latino and Asian immigrants, like the Germans before them, threaten each states idea and formation of community, over the course of just three years, four states passed English-only laws, beginning in Virginia (1981) and followed by Indiana, Kentucky and Tennessee in 1984.

Beginning America's Second Wave

Beginning in 1981, a national resurgence began in a similar fashion as the nation's first wave of English-only legislation. Like witnessed before, efforts by many states throughout the 1980's sought to define the parameters of community, chiefly, who does and does not belong. Language policies within the grander scheme of community formation, argues Ronald Schmidt, "can be understood best in terms of the politics of identity," an ongoing process that (re)creates, (re)defines, and (re)identifies "us" and "them."²⁷ Defining who we are as a nation along with what language we speak represents, amongst other things, what Mark McPhail understands as "a reflection of underlying discursive assumptions about self and other, identity and difference," assumptions that link homogeneity with the belief that a foreseeable social order is obtainable.²⁸ Driven in many ways to exclude "foreign" accents from their definitions of community, legal scholar Mari Matsuda posits, "we say a person has an accent to mark difference from some unstated norm of non-accent, as though only some foreign few have accents."²⁹ Here, Matsuda is not only speaking to the nature of discrimination suffered by those with "foreign" accents, like the English-only movement, but most importantly, discussing the various voices/accents that comprise our national community, noting the non-existence of one or a singular American accent or language. Matsuda's argument that we use an accent to mark difference, precisely describes part of the impetus behind English-only laws overall, while other segments of such sentiments can be attributed to such factors as race and ethnicity.

In succession with rising levels of immigration, English-only proponents in Virginia felt the necessity to fortify their state community through the declaration of English as their official language. To illustrate, the 1981 House Bill 1770 declared not only English as the official language of the Commonwealth, but that school boards were under no obligation to teach the "standard curriculum" in a language other than English. This bill, remarks Raymond Tatalovich, not only supported an official language, but "opposition to bilingual education was clearly the motivation behind this statute. . . Its purpose was to influence education, not just to be symbolic."³⁰ As a statute intended to send an anti-bilingual education message to President Ronald Regan, it dually sounded the once dormant anti-immigration/nativist alarm to other states.

While Tatalovich is correct when speaking to the anti-bilingual education element of the bill, the final 1986 House Joint Resolution (236) also contains its own element of identity politics. Of the four clauses added to the Joint Resolution by the state Senate Rules Committee, one clause declared:

WHEREAS, English is the national and unifying language of the many peoples who have become known simply as Americans and who speak with one tongue.³¹

Here, the prevailing belief that English-only prequalifies one for entrance into the Virginia community follows the observation of Amardo Rodriguez. For Rodriguez, those who choose to define community by our differences rather than by our commonalities strategically create a rhetorical atmosphere open and accepting of racial, ethnic and linguistic hierarchy. With this sentiment, posits Rodriguez, comes the belief "that such commonality is necessary for order, unity, and the making of the *good society*," whereas in reality, "such commonality retards us mentally, emotionally, and spiritually by discouraging us from developing ways of being that foster compassion, trust, and openness that come with dealing with peoples of different situations and backgrounds."³² In return, community, or "Americanism" becomes "defined as a process by which an alien acquires our language, citizenship, customs, and ideals," writes Howard Hill.³³ The perceived lethality of lingual multiplicity within the confines of the Virginia community and at large, only reinforces a justificatory ontology steeped in division,

where “some groups are systemically favored while others are systematically deprived,” which oftentimes is the case with matters of race and public policy.³⁴

While Virginia was the first state in the late twentieth century to enact an English-only declaration, it certainly was not the last. In what followed Virginia’s lead, Indiana proponents sought to end bilingualism as both an educational and governmental practice and policy. To keep Indiana, Tennessee and Kentucky functioning as one society united by one language, proponents pointed to uniformity and societal order as the catalyst behind their legislative efforts. Just three years after the Virginia law, Indiana, Tennessee and Kentucky joined the crusade to legislate linguistic commonality. Albeit different states and different political parties sponsoring these laws, their arguments were identical. In Indiana for instance, a supportive editorial in the *Indianapolis Star* best articulated proponents rally cry. In the opening line, the editorial read, “a common tongue for communication is essential to any society, whether tribal group or large industrial state. This is almost universally recognized.”³⁵ Social cohesion in this regard is only achievable through “sameness,” diversity, or bilingualism, only stiffens societies striving toward union. Much of the same sentiment was expressed in Tennessee, whereas much debate centered on exactly what type/dialect of English unites Tennesseans. Do Tennesseans speak “English,” “American English,” or as State Senator (D) Ira Cohen of Memphis proposed, “Southern English?” If nothing else, Tennessee’s English-only proponents were certain that English united them as a community, regardless of whether it was “Southern,” “American,” or simply “English.”

While there were no large-scale debates in Kentucky, Tennessee or Indiana against the passage of an English-only bill, the belief held by lawmakers and their constituents that society remained exposed to the prophesized perils that accompany linguistic multiplicity drove many states to introduce and overwhelmingly pass such measures. In the same *Indianapolis Star* editorial, it argued, “a society needs one language in which everybody is functionally literate,” however, provides no evidence to suggest that Indiana, or the nation is suffering from a tower of babel, or evidence to support the supposed unifying force of the English language. Much of the same occurred in Kentucky, after receiving the endorsement of the House Committee on State Government, their English-only bill received overwhelming support. Such supportive sentiment and haste passage that accompanied these bills is best captured by the words of James Baldwin in his first major essay, the “Harlem Ghetto.”³⁶ For Baldwin, “the American ideal after all is that everyone should be as much alike as possible,” mirroring the legislative intent embodied by America’s second wave to name and define community along homogenous racial, ethnic and linguistic lines.

Belief in the possible creation of societal order through linguistic means is what drew many supporters and fueled the nation’s first and second wave of English-only campaigns. Assumptions that posit unity through “sameness” came at the expense of those casted as “foreigners,” oftentimes these were immigrants. Once the perceived duality between societal order (English + “American”), and chaos (“foreigners”) formed, calls for assimilation followed. The belief that societal unification can only be achieved through a national/official language is what contributes and simultaneously bankrupts our perceptions of a supposedly foreseeable and achievable societal order.³⁷ English-only proponents frequently construct their official language crusade policy issues therein as “a series of choices between similarity or difference, wholeness or fragmentation, assimilation or dissimilation, and uniformity or diversity,” ultimately seeking to define and differentiate between “American” and “foreigner.”³⁸ At the risk of societal devolution, securing English as the official language unleashes linguistic homogeneity as society’s only safeguard against devolution. What remains rather peculiar in the history of this

debate is that nowhere has a single language declaration been proven or credited with ameliorating national unity, yet such belief continued to thrive.

Unless harnessed by the supposedly “uniting” spirit of English-only legislation, the possibilities of social disunity and civic disharmony remained a lingering threat amidst Latino and Asian immigration for America’s second wave. The demand for language restrictions, as noted by James Crawford, “is a demand to reinforce the existing social order.”³⁹ This demand to legislate the “American ideal” or to reinforce social order arises at moments, which we are most vulnerable to redefining our national identity (immigration) and targets racial and linguistic “foreigners” as threats or outsiders to “our” stable community. As the threatening menace in need of legislative action, proponents articulated racial, ethnic and linguistic diversity as those traits that fail outside their framing of community. Because of the qualifiers placed around membership into each states community, English-only proponents benefited from the execution of a unique rhetorical device, one capable of separating previously unified ideas into separate concepts, largely understood as disassociation.

Usually, when asked a question of “what is,” such as “what is community,” it oftentimes is followed by an example, by either definition or visual depiction. In providing a response, the rhetor may either, (1) reaffirm a long withstanding concept, or (2) execute the opposite, seeking to disjoin previously assumed beliefs by rendering an alternative response. Dissociation, notes Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, is, “the technique of sundering previously constructed integrities, primarily by showing the unstable, illusionary, and false nature of the prior association.”⁴⁰ For example, when proponents defined community, instead of reaffirming such concepts as proximity, they rendered an alternative response, one that fostered racial, ethnic and linguistic fragmentation.⁴¹ Although, as Mary Stuckey reminds us, “not everyone is invited to the national party; just enough of us to keep the party going, to sustain the fragile consensus allowing us to function more or less collectively most of the time.”⁴² Overall, these rhetorical maneuvers and prevailing sentiments proved to be invaluable assets throughout America’s first and second wave whereas proponents naming and defining of community was vital to the successful execution of their campaigns.

Conclusion

For English-only proponents, maintaining their brand of community was predicated upon erecting definitional and policy barricades that precluded the inclusion of “foreigners.” In his reflections on community, the German social psychologist Erich Fromm argues, “the desire for interpersonal fusion is the most powerful striving in man. It is the most fundamental passion; it is the force which keeps the human race together. . . the failure to achieve it means insanity or destruction.”⁴³ This strategic fragmentation, constructed largely at the hands of hate, reminds us of the fluid nature of communities. Fragmented or otherwise, communities, as J. Michael Hogan affirms, “are living creatures, nurtured and nourished by rhetorical discourse,” which possess the propensity to transform over space and time, as both waves of the English-only movement illustrate.⁴⁴

Questions of national identity, or more precisely, questions of belonging, repeatedly contribute to intense debates carried out at all levels of government. The crisis of community that surrounds these debates pits the homogenous “American” brand of community against all things “foreign,” whether these characteristics pertain to race, nationality, language or otherwise.⁴⁵ While race is not *the* sole factor behind these campaigns, race, particularly pertaining to the nation’s second wave, occupies a dominant position. Said best, Jonathan Rossing observes, “race saturates everyday life... these messages shape racial ideologies, influence race consciousness, and inescapably impact civic judgment and action ranging from the personal and mundane to the institutional

and cultural.”⁴⁶ For Rodney Hero, “race and ethnicity are and have been pervasive influences in the political and social system” that continues to occupy an area of both concern and continual contemplation.⁴⁷ In turn, debates such as these have led Roderick Hart to believe that hate “has long been the handmaiden of community,” where not only is “the human story a story of love but is also a story of hate.”⁴⁸ Through the eyes of Amardo Rodriguez, this story of hate has contributed to the denial of “emergent conceptions of community that are capable of fostering levels of bonding among diverse peoples who are increasingly sharing our spaces and places” and instead has pitted “American” versus “foreigner.”⁴⁹

Whether we examine past or present English-only campaigns or begin with the forced “Americanizing” of Native Americans, or begin in Nebraska, the quest toward achieving “national unity” has come at the cost of many.⁵⁰ The political and legal efforts undertaken by proponents during these campaigns clearly defined and articulated, as Jim Cummins notes, “who is an insider and who is on the outside looking in. They set the rules for entry and the conditions for staying. They make clear who are the landlords and who are the tenants.”⁵¹ As such debates continue over what it means or who are “Americans,” whether we focus upon immigration or otherwise, if nothing else, revisiting these debates possesses a unique timely and timeless element, one that continues to surface today. Most recently, such recurring sentiments can be found rather easily. In April of 2010 for instance, Alabama GOP gubernatorial candidate Tim James, son of former Alabama Governor Fob James, released an English-only campaign ad. Introduced as a “cost-saving measure,” in his “we speak English” ad, James vows to offer the states drivers license exam in English-only, adding, “this is Alabama; we speak English. If you want to live here, learn it.” Episodes like these are becoming more visible throughout the country as the debate over immigration reform and the paranoia of a Latino majority weigh heavily on the minds of many Republican office holders, seekers, and constituents. The prophesized threats of “foreign” languages (Spanish), as preached by English-only advocates, continue to justify and legitimize efforts toward “protecting” the English language and the “American” way of life from those who represent a threat to our stable community.⁵²

In Oklahoma, State Question 751 asked voters whether English should be the state’s official language. According to the ballot question, this measure “dictates the language to be used in taking official State action. It requires that official State actions be in English.” While this question only applies to the states “official actions,” a term the bill does not define; the question was nonetheless placed on the ballot. Introduced by Oklahoma Republican State Representative Randy Terrill, this ballot question, while continuing to recognize and provide for Native American languages, would eliminate all other bilingual publications and translators in efforts to cut costs, notes its supporters. As it was, on November 2, 2010, Oklahoma became the thirty-first state to pass an official language bill.

With murmurs of immigration reform echoing throughout the halls of Congress, coupled with recurring appearances of national language policies, the relationship between immigration and language policies remains intact, showing no signs of regression. Inherent within proponent’s defense of English-only policies are restrictive articulations of who and what is and is not “American,” embodying the rhetorical dynamics present within Roderick Hart’s concept of “uncommunity.”

Footnotes

¹ The battle to prevent racial comingling, anti-miscegenation statutes and court cases that upheld anti-miscegenation were plentiful. See, Alfred Alvins, “Anti-Miscegenation Laws and the Fourteenth Amendment:

The Original Intent." *Virginia Law Review* 52.7(1966): 1224-1255; James Kinney, *Amalgamation! Race, Sex and Rhetoric in the Nineteenth Century American Novel*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985). Werner Sollors, *Interracialism: Black and White Intermarriage in American History, Literature and Law*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Elise Lemire, *Miscegenation: Making Race in America*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

² Although this saying would later be expressed by President Theodore Roosevelt, this essay does not analyze his remarks. However, for a masterfully executed analysis of President Roosevelt's speeches and statements on assimilation and national identity, see, Leroy G. Dorsey, *We Are All Americans, Pure and Simple: Theodore Roosevelt and the Myth of Americanism*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007).

³ Bill Piatt, *Only English? Law & Language Policy in the United States*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), 13.

⁴ For more on this episode, see: H Mencken, *The American Language: Supplement I*. (New York: Knopf, 1945).

⁵ See, Charles Anderson, *White Protestant Americans*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1970).

⁶ See, Robert Haig, "The Revenue Act of 1918" *Political Science Quarterly*, 34:3 (1919): 369-391.

⁷ J. Michael Hogan, "Preface: Rhetoric and Community," in *Rhetoric and Community: Studies in Unity and Fragmentation*, ed. J. Michael Hogan (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), xiii.

⁸ Noam Chomsky, *Language and Responsibility*. (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979), 191.

⁹ Hogan, "Preface: Rhetoric and Community," in *Rhetoric and Community: Studies in Unity and Fragmentation*, xii.

¹⁰ Hogan, "Preface: Rhetoric and Community," in *Rhetoric and Community: Studies in Unity and Fragmentation*, xiii.

¹¹ State of Nebraska, 1919, *Sessions Laws*. Lincoln.

¹² Raymond Tatalovich, *Nativism Reborn: The Official English Language Movement and the American States* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1995), 35.

¹³ For perhaps what is the best discussion on constitutive rhetoric, see: James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstructions of Language*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. And also by White, see: *Essays on the Rhetoric and Poetics of the Law* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

¹⁴ Tatalovich, *Nativism Reborn: The Official English Language Movement and the American States*, 36.

¹⁵ Jack Citrin, "Language Politics and American Identity" *Public Interest*, 99 (1990): 96.

¹⁶ Tatalovich, *Nativism Reborn: The Official English Language Movement and the American States*, 37.

¹⁷ Tatalovich, *Nativism Reborn: The Official English Language Movement and the American States*, 50.

¹⁸ Dennis Baron, *The English-Only Question: An Official Language for Americans?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 143.

¹⁹ John Higham, *Strangers in a New Land*. (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 235.

²⁰ Roderick P. Hart, "Introduction: Community by Negation- An Agenda for Rhetorical Inquiry," in *Rhetoric and Community: Studies in Unity and Fragmentation*, ed. J. Michael Hogan (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), xxv.

²¹ Hart, "Introduction: Community by Negation- An Agenda for Rhetorical Inquiry," in *Rhetoric and Community: Studies in Unity and Fragmentation*, xxv.

²² James Crawford, *At War with Diversity: US Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety*. (Cleveland: Multilingual Matters LTD, 2000), 21.

²³ Tatalovich, *Nativism Reborn: The Official English Language Movement and the American States*, 67.

²⁴ Tatalovich, *Nativism Reborn: The Official English Language Movement and the American States* 68.

²⁵ J. Michael Hogan, "Preface: Rhetoric and Community," in *Rhetoric and Community: Studies in Unity and Fragmentation*, ed. J. Michael Hogan (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), xiii.

²⁶ See, Desmond King, *Making Americans: Immigration, Race and the Origins of a Diverse Democracy*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

²⁷ Ronald Schmidt, *Language Policy and Identity Politics in the United States*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 47.

²⁸ Mark Lawrence McPhail, *The Rhetoric of Racism Revisited: Reparations or Separation?* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 87.

²⁹ Mari Matsuda, "Voices of America: Accent, Antidiscrimination Law, and a Jurisprudence for the Last Reconstruction." *The Yale Law Journal* 100:5 (1991): p. 1330.

³⁰ Tatalovich, *Nativism Reborn: The Official English Language Movement and the American States*, 196.

³¹ Tatalovich, *Nativism Reborn: The Official English Language Movement and the American States*, 199.

³² Amardo Rodriguez, *Communication, Space, & Design: The Integral Relation between Communication and Design* (Lanham: Hamilton Books, 2005), 28.

³³ Howard C. Hill, "The Americanization Movement," in *Race and Ethnicity in Modern America*, ed. Richard Meister (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1974), 33.

³⁴ Robert Lieberman, *Shaping Race Policy: The United States in Comparative Perspective*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

³⁵ Tatalovich, *Nativism Reborn: The Official English Language Movement and the American States*, 200.

³⁶ See, James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, eds., *Collected Essays*. (New York: Library of America, 1998).

³⁷ The belief that social order can be achieved through one-way assimilation accepts the belief that a cultural, racial, and linguistic hierarchy exists. For a more in-depth discussion on culture and hierarchy, see: Amardo Rodriguez, "Communication and the End of Hierarchy." In *Transformative Communication Studies: Culture, Hierarchy, and the Human Condition*, ed. Omar Swartz (Leicester, UK: Troubador Publishing Ltd., 2008,) 1-15.

³⁸ David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 80.

³⁹ Crawford, *At War with Diversity: US Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety*, 27.

⁴⁰ Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver. (Norte Dame: University of Norte Dame Press, 1969), 411.

⁴¹ Of interest to those interested in more on dissociation, see: Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos*. (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 1991) and Edward Schiappa, "Dissociation in the Arguments of Rhetorical Theory." *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, 22 (1995): pgs.72-82.

⁴² Mary Stuckey, *Defining Americans: The Presidency and National Identity* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 2.

⁴³ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 17.

⁴⁴ Hogan, "Conclusion: Rhetoric and the Restoration of Community" in *Rhetoric and Community: Studies in Unity and Fragmentation*, 292.

⁴⁵ For a more thorough argument against bilingualism on the grounds of its fragmenting effects on national unity, see: Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991).

⁴⁶ Jonathan P. Rossing, "Critical Intersections and Comic Possibilities: Extending Racialized Critical Rhetorical Scholarship" *Communication Law Review* 10:1 (2010) p. 10.

⁴⁷ Rodney Hero, *Faces of Inequality: Social Diversity in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5.

⁴⁸ Hart, "Introduction: Community by Negation- An Agenda for Rhetorical Inquiry," in *Rhetoric and Community: Studies in Unity and Fragmentation*, xxvi-xxvii.

⁴⁹ Rodriguez, *Communication, Space, & Design: The Integral Relation between Communication and Design*, 35.

⁵⁰ With particular attention to Native Americans, the endangerment of their native tongues can be traced to early America. In efforts to promote linguistic homogeneity, amongst other interests, Native American board schools were established to "Americanize" or "civilize" Native Americans to "American" culture and language. See: William Tierney, *Official Encouragement, Institutional Discouragement: Minorities in Academe--The Native American Experience*. (Greenwich: Ablex Publishing Corp, 1992). Joel Spring, *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States*. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994). David Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928*. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995).

⁵¹ Jim Cummins, "Foreword," *Language Ideologies: Critical Perspectives on the Official English Movement*. Eds. Roseann Duenas Gonzalez and Ildiko Melis (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000), ix.

⁵² See, Donathan L. Brown, "On Defining Community: Race, Rhetoric and Exclusion Within the English as the National Language Debate." In *Domestic Policy Discourse in the US and the UK in the New World Order*, ed. Lori Maguire (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010), 233-249.