SILENCING THE OTHER:
LANGUAGE OPPRESSION IN THE UNITED STATES

Honors Thesis
*************************
PASS WITH DISTINCTION

SARAH WEAKLEY
FALL 2008
ADVISOR: DR. VICTOR VILLANUEVA
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH/AMERICAN STUDIES
COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS
TO THE UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE:

As thesis advisor for Sarah Weakley

I have read this paper and find it satisfactory.

[Signature]
Thesis Advisor

2250 08
Date
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Précis

Foreword 1

Introduction

Why We’re Here 2

Chapter I

The R-Word and Language: Don’ Wan’ Talk About It 6

Chapter II

How We Got Here: Language Rights in Historical Contexts 11

Chapter III

What’s Said About Them: The Official English Movement in America 16

Figure 1 22

Chapter IV

The Power of Myths 23

Figure 2 28

Chapter V

Loss and Identity 29

Conclusions and Problems to Progress: Is it Possible? 34

Works Cited 38
Acknowledgments

I am continually indebted to my advisor, Dr. Victor Villanueva, a guy who showed me how to make people feel uncomfortable and force them to think about race. To all the professors who have taught me in one way or another how important it is to think and then speak about things that really matter, thanks. Big love to my family for being behind me and my “words”-- especially Andy, who has always been my biggest fan.
Précis

As America continues to become a country of many cultures and subsequently languages, a project had to be undertaken that dealt with the issue of language and race. This project deals specifically with the language rights and conflicts from a Spanish/English framework, where the issues of immigration and race are so very prominent. A brief history of languages in America and immigration legislation is given to background the current debate as well as the role of race in the rhetoric of this issue. Attention is paid most closely to those who support the goal of English as the official language of the United States, U.S. English. The literature and speeches from this group is examined and critiqued, noting specifically the myths that run throughout the proponents' arguments for this legislation. The effects of these myths on the subordinated multilingual community's identity and political standing are seen to be disastrous.

What comes of this research, then, is an understanding of what is lost when assimilation is touted and what is really being said about immigrants and those for whom English is not the native language. The racial underpinnings of the argument are explained, and instead what is posed is the possibility of being a bilingual and bicultural America. There must be a way to live in this country without the loss of languages and the subordination of people due to language. Racism via language restriction is one of the things that tears America apart, not multilingualism. Progress, though, is possible.
Foreword

This is a polemic.
Introduction: What We’re Doing Here

Words, words, words. – Hamlet, Act II, Scene ii

The way in which a person chooses to speak his or her mind is paramount his or her identity. The words we choose to say, though, are not always our own words. We are constantly being reinvented by the influences of our society. Our language is shaped and twisted by the ruling ideological forces constantly at work. It is because of the ideologies shaping the use of languages in America and the forces behind those ideologies that language is at the forefront of the American experience. Language-- who speaks it, what language is spoken, who has the right to speak which language-- is what we’re talking about here. Hamlet nonchalantly dismisses words, but words are what drive a nation’s people, and it is words that can drive people apart.

In America the language that most of us hear on a daily basis is English. For most people living in this country, the terms “English-speaker” and “American” are synonymous, but many people do not realize that we have no politically mandated official language. We have never needed it, because the idea of America as a melting pot has abetted an assimilationist message that continues through today. Most immigrants coming into this country have not spoken English as their first language, and many eventually learn English in order to survive and thrive in this nation. But it came at a price.

Immigrants who come into this country are faced with the de facto national language of English and have assimilated for centuries. But there are those in this nation who believe that assimilation is not enough- these are the proponents of the Official English movement. Begun in the early 80s, this movement has strived to make English
the official language of this country, for which many support and more oppose. The popularity of this group is something to be mentioned, as the leading lobbyist group for Official English, U.S. English, has 1.3 million members as of 2008 (U.S. English). But those aren’t the only people who care, as this issue is contentious among friends and relatives, colleagues and partisans. This is an issue that not only academics argue, as language and the right to one’s language is a deeply personal and racial discussion. Responding to the Official English movement of the past few decades, I will show that underneath their arguments are seeds of racism, given power through legislation on a state and federal level. It is prejudice made tangible.

Ultimately, I wish to uncover the ways language restriction in the immigrant and second-language English speaking community comprises another form of racism in the twenty-first century. Language has become one way to talk about race without having to talk about it, and looking historically and theoretically at myths and identity, we will see that language is racialized as much as national origin. The same ways those in power talk about ethnic minorities they also talk about linguistic minorities. The English Only legislation of the past decades is a problem in and of itself, but it is also a symptom of the greater problem of racism towards the foreigner in America. Racism is the engine that drives language restrictionist policies in the United States, and the immigration issue inextricably linked to language policies and practices by those who support Official English. Immigrants and those who do not speak English as a first a language are seen as the enemy by those who believe a multicultural America is breaking this nation apart. This opinion is the one that needs to be debunked-- it is the ideological house of cards that needs to be blown over. We can’t talk about race in this country without talking
about immigrants, and we can’t talk about immigrants without talking about language.
The bigotry faced by immigrants trying to learn English in this country because of racialized language practices is the primary concern of this thesis, proving eventually that race is the issue when speaking about language in a country that so often wants to ignore race.

In order to find the ideologies that live behind the Official English movement I have to start at the beginning: with race. For race is the background to how we live and move, who we choose to be in contact with and who we avoid. It is the dissonant soundtrack to America’s existence. Once established as the foreground for the discussion, the history of the immigrant situation must be looked at from this racialized view as I discover the same old tropes being played out in the current immigrant question. The Official English movement-- its ideologies, its literature, and its myths-- are then explored as finally the loss and harm done to the multilingual English learner is brought to light. It is complicated and hard work to see a scourge that America has been hiding for years, but it is a task that needs to be undertaken.

The issue must then be looked at from a historical perspective, an ideological perspective, and a racial perspective, all hoping to assert the prominence of racially oppressive themes throughout the language restrictionist movement’s literature. Finally, we want to hope for progress-- meaning not homogeneity of language in America, but a place where respect for all languages can occur without the loss of efficiency for this nation, and loss of identity for those who do not speak English as a native language. Progress is possible, but we need to cut through the myths and be frank about the ways in which race plays into the mistreatment of those who come into this country not speaking
English. The problem of race will not be solved unless it is first recognized (the greatest step) and dealt with in a way that is constructive for all parties. I am not here to make people feel guilty. I am here to uncover the truth about what it will take to stop the newest form of racism in America, specifically those for whom English is a foreign language.
Chapter I

The R-Word and Language: Don’ Wan’ Talk About It

The language lines run deep in a people, for language is the signifier of a people second only to race. It is one of the greatest ways we decide who’s in and who’s out of the conversation, but it has always been attached to a racialized portrait of an individual. But no one wants to talk about race. We don’t talk about race because the past is brought up; visions of oppression float in the heads of white Americans, and we feel guilty. No one wants to feel guilty. So, instead, language is the way in which race is implicitly talked about in America, as the “minimization of racism is a frame that suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor” in the way a linguistic minority, who is most often also a racial minority, will succeed in America (Bonilla-Silva 29). Racism and discrimination aren’t the problem, many white Americans say; different “conflicting” languages are the problem instead. Roseann Dueñas-González, takes this unspoken ideology and finally puts it into words: “Obviously, it is much less problematic in our society to talk about the officialization of English than it is to talk about race” (González 2: xxvii). We move the problem from the loaded R-word to something that doesn’t make us feel quite so bad. “English Only has poisoned the national conversation about race…it has made discussions on language a seemingly legitimate platform for delivering an exclusionary or anti-immigrant message” (González 1: xxxiii). Projecting the problem onto something else in order to avoid facing discrimination head-on is something those in power are very good at, and the avoidance of talking about race when it comes to non-native English speakers is a symptom of the minimization of racism that Eduardo Bonilla-Silva speaks so bluntly about.
As much as people don’t want to talk about it, race must be mentioned in this discussion because language and race will likely never be separated. America, though, has become in the last hundred years or so a place where “race is ‘common sense’…a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world” (Omi and Winant 23). It is no wonder that race is common sense; for humans have a “natural, normal propensity for prejudgment” because of categorization that must occur for humans to be able to easily function in the world (Fiske 36). Sociologist Gordon Allport, in his foundational writing *The Nature of Prejudice*, believes that “orderly living depends on it” (Dovidio, et al. 3). We as humans must have the rubrics of identification in order to organize our world. These categories, though seemingly innocuous, always provide affective tags in the mind of the listener, and it is within these affective tags where the roots of prejudice lie. Now, race and the ideologies concurrent with each and every race in this country have seeped into the emotional consciousness of Americans. These ideologies disrupt families, communities, and identities; they delineate the good from the bad, and set up a Manichean discourse of “Us vs. Them.”

Race is something that identifies us regardless of our choosing, yet it is fully a social construct. Now, someone’s racial identity is among the most important aspects of a person’s identity, shaping opportunities and personalities, habitation and occupation. It is the all-encompassing aspect of a single human being: “Without a racial identity one is in danger of having no identity” (Omi and Winant 22). Within the American language debate, this racial identity is linked also to an individual’s linguistic identity, with language becoming the way in which a person’s identity is discussed without having to mention race. “Spanish-speaker” has taken the place in the debate for “Hispanic,”
"Chinese-speaker" for "Asian;" for those racial markers bring up a slew of images and stereotypes that Americans many times don’t even know they harbor. But racial prejudice is the carbon monoxide seeping into the language debate in America. Soon, unless we face the racial stratification issues multilingual Americans are faced with, our country will slide further into denial of a prejudiced past and erupt in racial strife in the future.

Racial stratification occurs because of institutional structures created to limit subordinates options— in this case, anyone who is not the dominant white class (Jackman 97). The history of white dominance in this country has created a system in which prejudice is no longer merely just an outward expression of an inward visceral hostility, but instead it is motivated by political, social, and economic power. Race plays into this structure because it creates ingroups and outgroups— with the ultimate ingroup in American life that of Anglos. “The central motivator for dominant groups in unequal social relations is not hatred but the desire to control,” states Mary Jackman, this control coming in the form of non-White ethnic groups being used for White’s purposes (90). Stratification in our current economic system works because it keeps power firmly in the hands of the white hegemony, as many of the ethnic and subsequently linguistic minorities are forced to be merely cogs in the machine because of economic pressures. Audré Lorde, quoted by Cornel West in Race Matters identifies that, “Institutional rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people” (63). Those in the outgroup (racialized minorities) are often the ones relegated to the positions of “surplus people” due to their underprivileged past and the continuance of racialized procedures in all fields of business. Immigrants since the end of slavery are these surplus people. The immigrant question continually is raised in America
specifically about the Spanish-speaking population, where the image of Spanish-speakers is continually equated with economic poverty and failure in their racial group as well. There is rarely a chance for a minority to speak up in a job situation because most are struggling to get by, and this is exactly what any group in power wants: an adherence to the ruling ideology not by choice but by economic force.

Control is also maintained in racial matters because of the white’s ability to label those they deem subordinate, the power to label held firmly in the hands of those with political and economic power. Labeling in the language of the oppressor has occurred in racial matters since the beginning, as “dark” was used by those Europeans to connote those who are sinners, unclean, or savage (Green 55). Today, labeling is a double-edged sword because of the difference in denotation and connotation of phrases such as, “Limited English Proficiency” (LEP). While on the surface it perfectly describes the person linguistically, the mental and emotional translation is lost, as now the image of a brown immigrant comes into mind firstly for most white English speakers. This phrase is not unfit in and of itself; but those in power purposely do not separate and cull the images and stereotypes attached to immigrants that have come to permeate the American landscape for political purposes. Labeling those who do not speak English has the same affect racial epithets do on a outgroup, oppressing one of the fundamental tenets of an identity along the same ideological lines as race. “Thus, when an individual is labeled in an unjust and unequal society, and is labeled by the very people who maintain its injustice and inequality, then...the very labels attached to the victims of that society are the very means by which repression is carried out in that system” (Wilson 88). Non-native English speakers are the ones who are causing their own problems, many say, by
specifically about the Spanish-speaking population, where the image of Spanish-speakers is continually equated with economic poverty and failure in their racial group as well. There is rarely a chance for a minority to speak up in a job situation because most are struggling to get by, and this is exactly what any group in power wants: an adherence to the ruling ideology not by choice but by economic force.

Control is also maintained in racial matters because of the white’s ability to label those they deem subordinate, the power to label held firmly in the hands of those with political and economic power. Labeling in the language of the oppressor has occurred in racial matters since the beginning, as “dark” was used by those Europeans to connote those who are sinners, unclean, or savage (Green 55). Today, labeling is a double-edged sword because of the difference in denotation and connotation of phrases such as, “Limited English Proficiency” (LEP). While on the surface it perfectly describes the person linguistically, the mental and emotional translation is lost, as now the image of a brown immigrant comes into mind firstly for most white English speakers. This phrase is not unfit in and of itself; but those in power purposely do not separate and cull the images and stereotypes attached to immigrants that have come to permeate the American landscape for political purposes. Labeling those who do not speak English has the same affect racial epithets do on a outgroup, oppressing one of the fundamental tenets of an identity along the same ideological lines as race. “Thus, when an individual is labeled in an unjust and unequal society, and is labeled by the very people who maintain its injustice and inequality, then...the very labels attached to the victims of that society are the very means by which repression is carried out in that system” (Wilson 88). Non-native English speakers are the ones who are causing their own problems, many say, by
keeping themselves separate by language. They “fail to melt” or “don’t want to learn English” which puts all of the blame on them and no one else. The victims of linguistic oppression are labeled as the perpetrators of conflict, just as race continues to be. The two must be mentioned together because a person’s identity includes both language and race. Identity and language go hand in hand, and the racialization of language through xenophobic rhetoric is now another mutation of discrimination in twenty-first century America.
Chapter II

How We Got Here: Language Rights in Historical Contexts

For both sides of the argument, the patterns of immigration in this nation’s history play and important role in how America’s restrictionist past helped shaped the ideas of language politics of today. The largest wave of immigration came between 1820 and 1924, with the largest numbers from Ireland (3.5 million) and Germany (Dicker 45). “Between 1850 and 1880, the number of foreign born Germans whose mother-tongue was German increased from 15 to 60 percent, largely as a result of immigration” (Schmid 35). Germany was established as the strongest of the languages other than English being spoken, and in 1880 there were 800 German-language newspapers across the nation (R. Daniels qtd in Dicker 45). During this second wave of immigration, German became second only to English with the greatest numbers of speakers in this country and also was the first instance of bilingual education. The language was at its height at the beginning of the twentieth century, and some began to believe English would be subverted and lose power. With the growing number of German immigrants in this country, they naturally came under attack as undermining what it meant to be “American.” In President Theodore Roosevelt’s now famous statement in regards to language in America in 1919, he illustrates the feeling of the nation at that time: “We have but one language here in America and that is the English language, for we intend to see the crucible turns out Americans and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house” (qtd. in H. Daniels 8). These sentiments, where English defined what it means to be an American, continue to be used in arguments explicitly and implicitly by proponents of Official English.
President Roosevelt's assertion would eventually come to pass sooner rather than later, as the beginning of World War I would herald a new time of "Americanization" that would eliminate everything deemed "un-American." Since Germany was our enemy at the time, their language was first on the list. Almost all German newspapers were forced out of print and petitions were circulated in local schools to abolish the teaching of German (Schmid 36); by the end of 1919 twenty-three states enacted laws restricting instruction in foreign languages and prohibited the speaking of foreign languages in schools by students. With sweeping mandates such as these, the ideology connecting the English language and loyalty to country was created and gained speed during the hysterical World War I era. This Americanization movement would not only put a stop to the teaching of other languages, but would culminate in the quota system for immigration from all nations, even Europe. While the Chinese and the Mexicans had already been barred from entrance into the country, America "effectively clos[ed] the gates to mass immigration" (Schmid 41) in the both the Immigration Act of 1921, which would still highly favor the Western European immigrants, and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924. The second act would also include a provision that would ban immigration for those "ineligible for citizenship" that would exclude mostly Japanese immigrants.

Putting a quota on the number of immigrants in the mid-1920s for all intents and purposes cooled off the nativist sentiments that accompanied the large wave of newcomers to the country. There would be a short period of tolerance for languages existing already in the United States between 1921 and 1940 (Dicker 99), but more restriction on both the language and immigration front would flare up again with the internment of Japanese-Americans during the Second World War. The only new
naturalization legislation during the War years was in 1943, in which China, our ally, would be given a quota of immigrants to America. Unfortunately, though, all people who looked Chinese were placed under one category, unlike their white counterparts which were split up between countries of origin (Schmid 38). The racial seeds of discrimination were flowering in this age of quotas, and the racial makeup of the country supposedly would have to be kept constant with whites as the majority if there was to be any rise of the U.S. as a world power. During this time, white hegemony continued with the oppression of opportunity in occupation and education based on race for African Americans, Native Americans, Mexican-Americans and others, further galvanizing racial stratification in America. As Ronald Schmidt says in his book *Language Policy and Identity Politics*, “the simultaneous provision of inferior, truncated, and segregated public education in the dominant culture and language, and the disparagement and denial of their own heritage cultures and languages, was a combination well designed to perpetuate their exclusion and subordination in U.S. society” (italics Schmidt 109). Combining oppression of new citizens as well as old, this country continued to close its eyes to the possibility of multiple voices of Americans.

It is in the past era mentioned above where both the assimilationists and pluralists find fodder for their arguments. For assimilationists, they tend to mention that with the large influx of immigrants at that time it became necessary for all people to unite under one language. This would eventually lead to the learning of English in order to fully succeed in America as the hysteria of both World Wars would warrant a new sense of nationalism to maintain morale during times of crisis. With this forced assimilation, illustrated most clearly in the change of the status of the German language, came a new
assumed “rite of passage for immigrants.” If you want to be American and be successful, you will learn English just as the immigrants who came before you did. Pluralists believe that this history proves that many languages once survived-- even thrived-- in America, and should not be forgotten when discussing language heritage in this country. There is a multilingual past in this country, and who’s to say that it is not possible again.

Unfortunately, with all the legislation that occurred in the early twentieth century, it is evident that restrictions were put on immigrants not for protection of an American identity so much as it was a protection of a white Anglo-American identity. Although many pluralists see some hope in trying to reaffirm America’s multilingual heritage achieved partially during the great wave of immigration by mentioning history, there simply are too many restrictions and too much deep seated racism to hope for that to occur again. Arguments from the past cannot hold up against the current colorblind racism of today. The racism is more than skin-deep.

Strides were made, though, in the fight for fair immigration and inclusion of others in America. In 1965, immigration law was passed that abolished the unfair quota system that was in place for more than forty years. This law “established more equitable immigration limits for all regions of the world, and placed family reunification and occupational skills in the United States at the top of the priority hierarchy” (Schmidt 120). Because of this new opening of America’s doors to more than just white Europeans, the amount of immigrants to the U.S. changed drastically. From 1987 to 1996 alone there were 10 million coming into the county as opposed to only 4.3 million from 1945 to 1965 (Schmid 61). In the decade currently, we are continuing to see immigration increase in rates of both documented and undocumented persons. What is most important for the
language movement came in not only the sheer numbers of the third wave immigrants, but the shifting countries of origin. Immigrants now are overwhelmingly from Latin America and the Caribbean, with 51.9 percent of the total, and Asian immigrants at 31.6 percent (Schmidt 121). “The U.S. abandoned the quota system that for nearly half a century had preserved that overwhelmingly northern European character of the nation” (Molesky 53); we are now a nation in which immigrants do not look like or sound like the ruling powers of the nation.

This new type and wave of immigration naturally causes concern for those in places of power. It is now possible for a white English speaker to be in a neighborhood in Chicago and have her grocery store clerk not speak English— a healthy concern. But this inconvenience is nothing compared to the ways in which immigrants are being treated because of their language. Because the second most popular language spoken in America is Spanish, and a majority of immigrants do come from Spanish-speaking countries, I will focus mostly on language rights for those who speak Spanish. The great influx of speakers is the subject of many debates on the floors of offices and classrooms, town halls and election speeches, and what needs to be discussed is the way in which language facilitates the negative ways immigrants are seen in America. America has changed in its demographics, and looking at the policies of the past we have seen how the fear of immigration changes the way Americans feel about their brothers and sisters in this country. The language issue has been and may always be tied to the immigration issue. Now more than ever language restriction and rights have proved to be a lynchpin in the discussion of the new ethnic makeup of America.
Chapter III

What's Said About Them: The Official English Movement in America

Optimistic pieties aside, we do not much like one another. The much vaunted "family of man" is not a happy assembly, at best it resembles a grumpy Christmas get together, at worst humanity divides into a infinity of face-offs, pitted one-on-one in innumerable civil wars. – Johnathan Green, Words Apart

The Official English issue for most Americans is either non-existent or already taken care of. For many, when asked what they think the Official Language is they undoubtedly say English. It is the language of instruction in schools, it is the overwhelming language of business and government, and it is the predominant language of the greater media. It is the lingua franca of this nation. There are over 600 million English speakers in the world, including those who speak English as a second or foreign language (González 1: xxix). With that in mind, it is understandable why one would think that English is our official language. The power of the English language, therefore, is undeniable around the world. In many foreign countries across the world the second language most children are expected to learn is English- the United States has gained so much power that English is seen as the way to succeed for all foreigners. It is a way in which societies are supposedly brought into modernity and as a de facto national language, the point gets across rather well.
Since the 1980s, though, a *de facto* national language was not concrete enough for some. The push for English to become the *de jure* national language began by one senator from California and an ophthalmologist from Michigan. On August 13, 1982, the late Senator S.I. Hayakawa of California introduced an amendment to immigration legislation in support of English as the Official Language of the United States. The goals of Senator Hayakawa’s speech were clear— to make English our one and only official language. His opening remark from that day would be echoed by men and women in support of his idea for years to come: “Language is a unifying instrument which binds people together. When people speak one language they become as one, they become a society” (S.2222).

While the other Senators chose to vote on that amendment in the affirmative, the bill was abandoned in the House and failed to get further. Hayakawa’s bill eventually failed in that Congress, but his introduction of the issue of a federal official language has continued in earnest with the lobbying group U.S. English at the forefront of the campaign.

U.S. English began in 1983 with John Tanton, an ophthalmologist from Petosky, Michigan at the helm. Tanton had long been involved in immigration issues: he served as the president for Zero Population Growth in the mid-1970s as well as the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), a lobbying group whose goals were to restrict immigration. Tanton and Hayakawa found common ground in the language issue, as both felt the assimilation process was not progressing fast enough during the influx of immigrants after 1965. With this political background in mind, the two Republican activists began their campaign in earnest. The group’s goal of Official English has remained the same since its inception. That particular goal has yet to be achieved on a
federal level in the last 20-plus years. So, in order to preserve the dominance of the English language, the group moved to legislate Official English on a state level in many venues. Through all of these different outlets, the thrust of the group is to maintain if not increase the number of English language speakers, and for immigrants to learn English faster than possible.

Moving to a state level, U.S. English has funded the majority of state groups' campaigns for the issue and has found unbelievable success. As of July 2008, there are 30 states with English as the Official language; as Arizona re-issued the legislation in 2006 after the original was struck down in 1998, and Kansas and Idaho voted yes in 2007 (U.S. English). The types of legislation for each state changes in scope and praxis state by state- some citizens of Official English states see it merely as a symbolic issue, much like the state bird, while others take it to more drastic restrictionist measures. Across the board the language of the amendment in state constitutions is steeped in political rhetoric that does nothing but hype the unification and practicality of the English language while trying not to seem exclusionary. In Mississippi, for example, the state legislation reads that, “we recognize the principle that a common language is necessary to preserve the basic internal unity required for political stability and national cohesion...[and] it is not the intent of this act to prohibit or discourage the use of foreign languages and cultures in private contexts” (S.2101). In this case, like most Official English legislation, there is a separation between the public and private uses of languages other than English. English is now the sole language of the government, except in “common-sense” situations such as “public health, judicial proceedings and the promotion of tourism” (U.S. English).

Looking at the literature from both state legislation and U.S. English, it is clear that
underneath it all there tends to be a rhetoric of “common-sense language policy” (U.S. English), as if everyone should already be on board with the policy.

But this language policy is varied in scope and can be ultimately destructive in the way in which it is carried out. Putting the practice of English-Only policies up for interpretation by individual businessmen and women has proven harmful for many multilinguals in terms of language rights. One of the most notable instances of this occurring is in the case of *Garcia v. Spun Steak*. At the Spun Steak Company in San Francisco in 1990, a rule was passed that all of its employees would have to speak only English in the workplace. Four of the thirty-three employees were bilingual Spanish speakers, and two employees were punished for speaking Spanish to one another on the job. (Valdés 140). Because of that they were forced to be separated at work and could not converse with their co-workers in Spanish. The two individuals took the case to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the case was sent to court. The district court found that the workplace rules “disparately impacted Hispanic/Latino workers without sufficient justification” (Valdés 140). Eventually the ruling of the district court was overturned, and the English Only rule stood; as the circuit court found insufficient evidence for national origin discrimination. Even though this case was clearly a racial discrimination issue, because the incident was talked about in terms of language the case was dismissed.

U.S. English is not the judge and doesn’t write the legislation. They are not in the state capitals or in the offices of business owners who decide to enact English Only rules in their workplace. U.S. English is able to do much more without the legislative hand-they are able to connect the Hispanic community to a “culture of poverty” (Giroux xi), a
race filled with janitors and cooks who are there because they “cannot and will not” learn English. The same old stereotypes are maintained in advertisements in which the Hispanic-looking man is a janitor in a classroom full of desks, the caption reading, “Immigrants who don’t learn English can really clean up in America” (Fig. 1). Maybe the immigrant has been in this country for less than a year, maybe he’s only been here a day—but no matter. The picture evokes the idea that this man is not trying to learn English at all. He is merely listening to the “ethnic politicians” who tell him he doesn’t need to learn English. The connection between race and language is made abundantly clear in their literature and images associated with immigration, but they fail to understand that immigrants aren’t fools.

It is widely understood that in order to succeed in this country you must know English: native Spanish speakers know that, multilingual citizens of this country know that, and immigrants entering this country know that. In the words of Elliot Judd, “Immigrants are not ignorant or blind; they readily see the need to learn English, for without it their lives and the opportunities for their children are limited” (165). In fact, “98% of all Latinos/Latinas responding to a national survey believe it essential for their children to read and write ‘perfect’ English” (Hakuta in Villanueva 337). The urgency for immigrants to learn English is understood, for with voluntary migration they understand the status quo in America. The English Only movement is implicitly stating that immigrants simply don’t understand this concept, and the leaders of U.S. English believe that by giving immigrants the opportunity to speak their native language they are effectively relegating them to linguistic ghettos they will never be able to get out of. By creating a Manichean discourse of English-Only or economic failure, U.S. English
advocates are not taking into account the possibility of being able to speak English and Spanish while not subverting what America is. Underneath the faux-concern for immigrants, U.S. English is, “not about English as the national language, but the erasing of Spanish within the domestic, national borders and silencing bilingualism as an option” (Aparicio 252). By destroying the possibility of speaking Spanish in public without being looked down at, this restrictionist legislation is also debasing those who speak Spanish as well: “Language is symbolic of the group of people who speak it; if that group is stigmatized by society, then its language is stigmatized by association” (Dicker 201). This stigmatization is evidence of the racism being played out in the everyday lives of individuals. It is therefore possible to deny a population of U.S. citizens the chance of a positive social identity because of the oppression of their language. Let’s be real: the threat of English being eradicated is not a reasonable argument, but the erasure of the Spanish language in this country is a viable possibility. And it seems to be working rather well.
Figure 1. Advertisement for U.S. English, 2008.
Chapter IV

The Power of Myths

Ideologies of power are based on myths: "it [the myth] points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us" (Barthes 83). The myth functions as a way for the average American to accept the "ready-made syntheses" of what it means to be a true citizen while still implicitly oppressing those who do not fit into the structure (Foucault 91). In the case of Official English, those who support it employ many myths at the same time in order to convince Americans that they must legislate language and force non-native English speakers to lose their language within three generations (Dicker 146).

A powerful myth-making discourse is that of unity. The bill currently in Congress is called the "English Language Unity Act" (H.R. 997), and is praised by Republicans and Democrats alike as the way in which America will become the most efficient and unified country in the world. Most print advertisements published by pro-Official English groups mention that, "the language that unites this country- English- is under attack" (U.S. English), and that we need to hold fast to this "common-sense" language or else we will never be able to understand the Americans that live right next door. The fear of this loss of unity is also strengthened when the "Babel argument" is brought about- the historical and Biblical trump card. In Senator Hayakawa's speech on that 1982 day, he used the unity ideology as a gift from God- a gift that was and is destroyed when we choose to diversify our languages:

In the Book of Genesis, it says when the Lord saw that mankind spoke one universal language, He said, "Behold, they are one people, and they all have one language...and nothing they propose to do will be impossible for them. If you will recall the Bible story, God destroyed this power by
giving mankind many languages instead of one. So you had proliferation of language breaking up human pride and, therefore, human power. (Hayakawa 1982).

Different languages in one country, to Hayakawa and to his constituents, would be ultimately divisive in every way. Writing commentary for the San Francisco Chronicle in 1983 (shortly after the first introduction of English Only legislation), Guy Wright says that, “it [U.S. English] will try to speak for those who don’t want to see this English speaking nation turned into a poly-lingual babel” (B9). Simply put, if we only had one language, nothing could be impossible. Instead though, proponents like Wright believe that those who choose not to have English as their primary language are removing the, “human pride, and therefore, human power” (Hayakawa 1982). It is a powerful rhetoric, used time and time again in order for the myth of “one language-one nation” to gain support and continuance. In this way, “Dedication to one’s ethnicity and native language is set in opposition to national cohesion;” and those who follow this discourse hold the assumption that, “If everyone looked alike and thought alike there would be no discrimination” (Dicker 50).

Historically and in all actuality, discrimination and conflict don’t disappear when people speak the same language. The fact is “homogenous nations are not always harmonious nations” (Iris Young qtd. in González 2:xxxvii)- some of the bloodiest wars have been fought on this nation’s soil among men who spoke predominantly the same English language (The Revolutionary War and the Civil War, in particular). This “imagined community” of homogeneity and peace is in fact just that—imagined (Benedict Anderson qtd. in Kroskirty 27). Because of the inherent racial underpinnings in this nation, there has never been a year of peace or a moment without oppression for the chosen subordinate group at the time. It doesn’t matter if an immigrant coming to this
country knows English very well, they will be judged first and foremost on their race-and this oppression will continue if a nation is "unified" under English or not. Language discrimination is both a symptom and a cause of oppression here in America, and no sweeping amount of unity rhetoric will change that. The speaking of Standard English and non-accented English are the "litmus test of Americanization" (Schmid 98)—but this America is speaking a specific type of language, "the Standard...most like the language of the white middle class" (Villanueva 40). Power languages, set against the backdrop of white supremacy, cannot be hidden under the guise of national unity.

The nation, after all, is the most important part of the equation here; it is the thing we want preserved at all costs. Because of this notion, the proponents of English Only use extensive national images and symbols to promote the "one language that makes this country great." One of their advertisements has a backdrop of the American flag and the beginning of the Pledge of Allegiance devolving into Spanish and then German, the caption at the end reading, "Join us. Support us. Fight with us. While we can still understand each other" (Fig. 2). Placing language next to the flag and the Pledge of Allegiance forces people to equate English with what it means to be a true American. Living without English as a national language, then, would be just as terrible to the patriotism of this country as living without the flag. "The nation is always conceived of a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many people to die for such limited imaginings" (Benedict Anderson qtd. in Krostkrity 27); people who set up language as a main element of what it means to be a part of this comradeship leads to loss in many ways. Loss of identity and
loss of agency for those who do not immediately fit into this fraternity are the sad results of this imagined community of restriction.

The loss is brought about through another myth: perhaps the strongest myth of all; that of this nation as a great melting pot. This is a myth squarely because it is not realistic. There are merely too many differences among us, differences that cannot and surely should not be assimilated. This assimilation is economically necessary in many cases, yes. We need to be able to communicate effectively with the people we are working for and with if the co-workers and business owners speak English. But, hiding behind this “efficiency” is something more personal that gets lost in this assimilation: one’s identity and agency. Gloria Anzaldúa, in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera* speaks for all those who feel the pressure of having their language taken away: “So, if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity- I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language I cannot take pride in myself” (1027). To assimilate fully is to change your relation to your native language- if given up fully, the Spanish language is merely a memory for those who come into this country, the link to their national identity getting weaker and weaker as American English pressure grows heavier and heavier.

Primary to the melting pot is the idea there is already a “tacit compact” between the non-English speaking immigrant that, “in deciding to emigrate, the immigrant has tacitly given up any claim to his or her language and has in effect agreed to exchange it for benefits obtained in the adopted land” (Wong 369). The immigrant knows what he’s getting into when he comes into this country, and he had better learn to deal with the Americanization he will need to undergo in order to try and become successful in this
country. It therefore becomes part of the psyche of the immigrant that the only way he will be accepted in this country is to assimilate- a price that many have to pay in order to try to and move up the economic ladder. In what Gonzalez describes as “autocolonization,” Spanish speakers end up adopting the dominant society’s values in order to gain a better place economically- they effectively put on an assimilationist face in order to avoid prejudice. “This makes them feel more American and more acceptable in society- a psychologically understandable reaction,” Gonzalez notes, as “autocolonization helps to explain why some Hispanics and other language minorities voted for the English Only and anti-affirmative action...initiatives” (2:xxix). Because of the Social Identity Theory purported by Tafjel and Turner (1986), members of all groups are “generally motivated to achieve and maintain a positive social identity” (Brown and Zagefka 56) and it is because of this that we often see Hispanics willingly forgo their linguistic rights in favor of English. It is easiest way to gain a more positive social identity in the eyes of an American that still believes that we must melt in order to have harmony. What needs to happen in order for harmony to occur is something much more than having someone speak the same language as you, or for someone to assimilate to a culture that isn’t his or her own. Harmony happens when acceptance comes before oppression, and the first step is to stop believing in myths that are archaic and harmful to individuals and groups alike.
I pledge allegiance to the Bandera de los Estados Unidos de Amerika und der republik...

Figure 2. “Will It Come to This?” Advertisement. U.S. English, 2008.
Chapter V

Loss and Identity

In colonization, there is always a loss. In traditional colonization, such as those in Africa and other former European colonies, the loss was the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual. The land was taken and it was clear to see who was being deprived and whose culture was being destroyed. Tactics were overt and violent, and consent was unnecessary. With some exceptions, most notably in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, this is not so in the United States today. Myths and ideology rule, as the Ideological State Apparatuses Althusser noted so well are always working among white Americans and immigrants of all types, and we no longer have to have teachers beating children to learn English. “All ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects,” Althusser notes (699) and this interpellation of ideology- in this case, the myths and ideas of what it takes to be a real American- are constantly seeping into a person. For a person like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, a native Kenyan writer and theorist, the forced use of English as his new language was a violent one- a physical forcing of children in Kenya to speak the colonizer’s English language. Because of this loss of language, for Thiong’o there was a stripping of agency, for, “the choice of a language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to the entire universe” (1126). Today the same can be true for those who are ideologically interpellated into believing the myths of those in power; and in the language minority’s case, it is believing that English only is the way to success and all other languages should be set aside.
Much like Thiong’o, then, the choice for native Spanish speakers of how to define themselves has been chosen for them by having to speak English only in the public sphere. Their place in the American social hierarchy has been decided for non-native English speakers once by their race, and second by their language. In this way then, their identity at bottom has been reified, and if they seem to not speak the best of English while still learning they are categorized as “foreigner” which many times currently is equivalent to “threat” or “subordinate.” Mostly though, without the confidence to speak English with an accent and the inability to speak one’s own language in a public sphere such as the workplace or have services in one’s own language, he or she is left out of American life. “Speakers lacking the legitimate competence are de facto excluded from the social domains in which this competency is required, or are condemned to silence,” says Horner and Trimbur (italics added, 612). The silence of linguistic minority communities can be deafening when speaking of the identification of groups in the American landscape. They are forced to be someone else for the sake of safety. For those linguistic communities Amos Wilson speaks: “If we don’t know who we are then we are whomever somebody else tells us we are” (38). Stripped of tongues, history and culture fall by the wayside- a critical part of an individual’s social identity as well. Poignantly written by Harold Isaacs (1975) and quoted in Language and Identity Politics (50):

The mother’s tongue...[is] the tongue in which the child learns what the world is and came to be, the words and tones in which the group describes itself, spins its tales of the past, sings its songs of joy or sorrow, celebrates the beauties of its land, the greatness of its heroes, the power of its myths.

But by the third generation of immigrants in America, it is lost. A history gone. No more songs, no more celebration.
Those on the Official English side of the debate believe that language and national origin, or race, have nothing to do with the argument. It is simply an issue of semantics, changing the way a person speaks has nothing to do with a person’s identity or their link to their particular cultural history. But, it has been found by the courts that language and national origin/race are inextricably linked, in particular in the Supreme Court ruling of *Hernandez v. New York* (1991): “It may well be, for certain ethnic groups and in some communities, that proficiency in a particular language, like skin color, should be treated as a surrogate for race under an equal protection analysis” (Chen 40).

From the highest judicial authority, then, language has been seen as a *surrogate* for race—so the idea that a person’s national and racial identity is not being harmed by restrictionist policies is clearly false. For most, the relationship between language and national origin maybe so close that, “separation is meaningless in practice” (Wong 376). Everyone knows the connection is there, but those who are forced to forgo their cultural identity for English are not worried about it and don’t often fight the system of assimilation already in place. Why not? Probably because they have no political clout, coming to this country many times with not enough money or power to change the way immigrants are treated.

In the words of Noam Chomsky, “Freedom is one of the commodities that is for sale, and if you are affluent, you can have a lot of it” (186). Unfortunately, immigrants don’t have much freedom in terms of language— they must then lose their identity. The possibility of adapting and changing the way America operates in order to include those who represent other languages is not an option on the table— it is much easier to get them to learn English than question our own policies.
Identity loss is not talked about just in terms of linguistic minorities, though; the identity of an “American” has been interrogated and re-created heavily. In the past ten years, the issue of what it means to be an American in terms of language and culture are paramount to almost all political rhetoric. This return to the identity question has caused resurgence in restrictionist practices in the wake of 9/11, because America needed to start defining itself once again in the face of a threat. Economic downturn has also led Americans to find someone or something to blame for this supposed loosening of the moral fibers in America. Immigrants seem to be a prime target. The xenophobia seen as the undercurrent in the English Only debate stems mostly from the apparent threat of a “browning” of America. “Invasions into the sphere of dominance- invasions into the neighborhood, into the workplace, and especially into the wallet- bring[s] out feelings of vulnerability,” Susan Dicker notes (148). These feelings of vulnerability seem very apparent at this time in America’s history- and it makes sense for traditionalists to find someone to blame. “Complaints about a breakdown in the process of assimilation seem to be especially prevalent during periods of high immigration, economic restructuring, and recession, providing fertile soil for the growth of nativism,” Carol Schmid mentions (82). Competition causes conflict, and the increased salience of immigrants in America today creates a need for protection of the social hierarchy. We as white Anglos don’t want to lose ground, so we find a way to oppress.

This losing ground, this xenophobia, fuels anti-immigrant sentiment that causes language restriction. Some call for a return to the “traditional values” of the conservative- those that control the business, education, and political fields in this country, like Dinesh
D’Souza. According to him, multiculturalism (multilingualism being a facet of that) is the “enemy at home” with the “left” being wholly responsible for the “moral depravity” of this country. “In short,” D’Souza proclaims, “the left wants America to be a shining beacon of global depravity, a kind of Gomorrah on the Hill” (264). The stereotype of someone who either speaks a language other than English or someone who empathizes with those who do (the Left, in this instance) is created as too lazy to assimilate, too militant to learn the language of the rest of America, or simply too dumb to want to learn. Overall, these people are fighting just to fight, not going quietly. That is what is said to be ruining America, breaking it apart instead of standing under a flag and singing “Proud to be an American” at the top of your lungs. The English Only movement creates and purports myths and stereotypes in order to keep systems of dominance intact. According to the System Justification Theory (Jost & Banji, 1994), for example, “dominant group members may be stereotyped as intelligent and hard-working, whereas subordinate group members may be stereotypes as unintelligent and lazy. Threats to the status quo may lead to heightened endorsement of these stereotypes in an attempt to defend and strengthen the system” (Esses, et al. 231). This is precisely what is occurring in the Official English debate, and economically it makes sense for those in power to stay there through threats and stereotypes. In this case, they feel like their agency is being stripped instead of the immigrants’ because they see their neighborhoods changing. There is no mention of privilege in the English speaking communities, or lack of threat to their identities because all identities in this issue feel threatened by the changing face of America. There must be a better way, though. A way without quite so much loss.
Conclusions and Problems to Progress- Is it Possible?

Never perhaps since the beginning of the world has there been an age that has less right to use the word progress than we. – G.K. Chesterton

You don’t stick a knife in a man’s back nine inches and pull it out six inches and call it progress. – Malcom X

What needs to happen isn’t simple. Unlike those who propose Official English as the way to unify this country, no sweeping legislation will make conflicts go away. As Eugene García mentions, “it is certainly far easier and cheaper to blame the immigrants and non-English speakers than to propose serious legislation to deal with the problems” (173), and the problems are clear. Linguistic minorities are oppressed because they speak their native language and are now (finally) asserting themselves as a viable and powerful entity in America. They are not going silently into the assimilationist model of America that has been prevalent for over a century, and they shouldn’t have to anymore. But more than anything, it is not as if immigrants aren’t learning English: this isn’t about how English is a dying language. The issue is about the loss of native languages in order to be replaced by English. Official English legislation is unnecessary because English is already the de facto national language. What the issue is about now is maintenance of other languages besides English, which is not occurring at all.

Foreign languages though, especially in the academic fields and in the business world, are now looked at as a commodity, even a boon for a potential job candidate. But
bilingualism seems to be worthwhile if it is only on the elite's terms. There is an inherent contradiction in the way we see bilingualism in America: "the restriction of natural bilingualism for the welfare of the minority coupled with the promotion of learned bilingualism for the welfare of the majority" (O. García qtd. in Dicker 146). We don't want the immigrants, but we want those in college and high school, the students who have already achieved higher status than immigrant children, to learn another language. But who do we want to bilingual? The already privileged. This double standard on linguistic acquisition and inherent values of languages as "good" or "bad" is clearly seen in the amount of money given to study abroad programs. Almost a hundred thousand American college students study abroad every year, "providing evidence for a particular stratum of the elite, learning a second language is worth the investment of time and expense. Yet, for a linguistic minority individual, a heritage language such as Spanish has proven to be a definite liability, and maintaining or developing that language is of little interest to the general public" (González 2: xix). The contradictions need to cease in what is deemed appropriate language use and acquisition- straight up, being bilingual is a good thing in an increasingly globalized world.

Instead of multilingualism as a positive, those who want Official English don't truly believe that assimilation into a broken and unequal system is a bad thing. They believe that by making sweeping legislation they will help all immigrants learn English instead of putting them into "linguistically isolated communities," as Murio Mujica, chairman of U.S. English believes. But, "a law cannot speed up the cognitive processes. A mandate cannot press someone to acquire a language faster than the mind can assimilate the new information" (Villanueva 338). And while those in the Official
English camp believe that English immersion education is the way to success for immigrant children, that posting signs in other languages undermine English in America, and that being able to converse on the job with members of your own linguistic community violates the unity of those in workplaces, all of it is misguided anger and veiled racist sentiments. Efficiency arguments could go on for days, but the fact remains that language restriction is as destructive as segregation to those who do not speak English as their first language. Let’s face it- elites are creating these policies because they are afraid of losing their power, and they need to reassert their place at the top by taking away the voices of those at the bottom. But there is nothing to be afraid of. In the words of Dennis Baron, “English wins. Hands down. Every time. End of story” (10).

Racial rifts will happen as long as we continue to pretend that they are gone, and the way we’re doing it now is veiling it in language policies. Racism in America is a problem, and it takes both personal and institutional practices to change in order for the problem to stop. What’s happening, though, is that racism-via-language restriction is forcing the same played out stereotypes and threats to American life to continue. They’re just wearing different clothes. Prejudice continues, and we don’t want to see it. And the issue is “further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture” as Toni Morrison writes (1008). We white kids are taught to ignore race and oppression, because it doesn’t affect us. Jamaica Kincaid writes to us whities, the tourists in her native colonized land of Antigua: “You needn’t let that slight funny feeling you have from time to time about exploitation, oppression, domination develop into full-fledged unease, discomfort; you could ruin your holiday”
(1226). But we need to be uncomfortable, or else nothing will change and oppressed citizens of our own country will continue to be marginalized.

I see it. You see it. The racial remarks, the immigrant who doesn’t want to speak English for the fear of ridicule, and the white woman like me who doesn’t know the problem exists because she grew up in an English speaking neighborhood. But tongues are being cut out by this movement in regressionist policies, and xenophobia is being touted in disguise as “helping” immigrants and minority communities who want a different way of expression. Children need to learn that their culture-- whatever it may be is worthwhile, and that begins with an America that doesn’t insist on other cultures to melt away. It is possible to create a space for English and another language to coexist, and that is what needs to happen in order to create a respect for cultures that were not historically dominant. Maintenance bilingual education and providing language materials to at least some of the different linguistic communities in America should be encouraged. Obviously not all languages can be catered to, but there at least needs to be a space where other languages are not just merely tolerated, but given a chance to be used. There needn’t be a loss of the native tongue in order for someone to merely survive in this country, and we shouldn’t believe that the past policies should be continued. If there is to be any hope for progress on this issue, we need to dispel the myth that English is the only way to be truly American, and we need to stop discrimination based on language in both the public and the private sphere. It is one of the first steps to create a space for different voices in America. Let them speak.

This has been a polemic.
Works Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria. “Borderlands/La Frontera.” Rivkin and Ryan 1017-1030.


Kincaid, Jamaica. “A Small Place.” Rivkin and Ryan 1224-1232.


