

The Official English Question

[Frequently Asked Questions About Official English](#), by James Crawford

For more than 200 years, Americans have gotten by without declaring English our official language. This raises an obvious question: Why should we do so now? Why does English suddenly need "legal protection" in a federal [Language of Government Act](#)? English Only advocates respond:

- Language diversity is a recent phenomenon in the United States, which the Founders never had to cope with.
- Before the last couple of decades, Americans had never provided bilingual ballots, education, publications, and similar services at public expense.
- Native-language accommodations discourage immigrants from learning English.
- Plenty of other countries have designated official languages to manage diversity. Why not the U.S.A.?

Let's examine the factual basis of these claims.

First, some history. Congress had never even considered declaring English the nation's official language until 1981, when a constitutional [English Language Amendment](#) was introduced by the late Senator S. I. Hayakawa. The only previous official-language legislation dates back to 1923: a bill designating "[American](#)" the national tongue. Less a patriotic gesture than a put-down of literary Anglophiles, the idea proved especially popular with Irish Americans, who saw an attempt to insult the British Empire. The measure died in Congress without coming to a vote, but was adopted by the state of [Illinois](#) (where English was quietly rehabilitated in 1969).

Notwithstanding a persistent legend that German missed becoming our official language by a single vote, American English has never been in jeopardy. In 1795, the 3rd Congress did consider and reject a petition by German Americans in Virginia to translate all federal laws into their language. A tie vote in the House of Representatives appears to have been broken by Speaker Frederick A. C. Muhlenberg, a Pennsylvania German with budgetary concerns and assimilationist tendencies. Poor recordkeeping leaves much uncertainty about what role he may have played. But the [Muhlenberg legend](#) is certainly false: German was never seriously considered as an official language – despite a century of claims by the likes of Ripley's Believe-It-or-Not, the German-American Bund, and *Parade* magazine.

Americans have traditionally resisted [language legislation](#), beginning in 1780, when John Adams proposed to establish an official [Language Academy](#) to set standards for English. This idea was rejected by the Continental Congress as an improper role for government and a threat to individual liberties. A century later President Teddy Roosevelt's attempt to "reform" English spelling met a similar fate. There was no English proficiency requirement to become naturalized as a U.S. citizen until 1906 – the first major language restriction to be enacted at the federal level.

On the other hand, the Continental Congress saw nothing wrong with printing its Journals and other official documents in German and in French (hoping to win Québécois support for the Revolution). No patriotic objections were raised against accommodating these politically significant minorities. States were even more likely to cater to minority needs. Before World War I, [bilingual education](#) was common in areas where nonanglophone groups enjoyed political clout. During the 19th century, state laws, constitutions, and legislative proceedings appeared in languages as diverse as Welsh, Czech, Norwegian, Spanish, French, and of course, German.

At other times, Americans have imposed restrictive language policies. California rewrote its [state constitution](#) in 1879 to eliminate Spanish language rights. In 1897, Pennsylvania made English proficiency a condition of employment in its coal fields, a none-too-subtle way to exclude Italians and Slavs. Security fears during the World War I era led to unprecedented bans on public use of the German language – in schools, on the street, during religious services, and even on the telephone.

So it is impossible to characterize any American "tradition" on the official language question. History is rarely so cooperative. Our responses to diversity have ranged from accommodation to tolerance to discrimination to repression, usually determined by factors that have little to do with language. These have included a minority group's race, religion, numbers, political clout, and cultural distinctiveness, as well as the majority group's feelings of prosperity, stability, or paranoia.

One thing we can say with certainty: **Language diversity has always been with us.** As early as 1664, when the island of Manhattan was ceded from the Dutch to the British, 18 different tongues were spoken there, not counting any of the hundreds of Native American languages spoken in North America at the time. In the 1790 census, German Americans accounted for 8.6 percent of the population – a proportion comparable to that of Hispanic Americans, 9.0 percent, exactly two centuries later. Certainly, there are **more** languages spoken in the U.S.A. today than in 1790. (The 1990 census reported 323 – surely an undercount.) But this is a quantitative, not a qualitative, change.

Proportionally speaking, the language-minority population was larger at the turn of the 20th century, when immigration reached its highest levels in U.S. history, than at the turn of the 21st. In the [1890 census](#), there were 4.5 times as many non-English speakers than in the 1990 census (with its superior capabilities for counting such groups). In 1910, 23 percent of foreign-born whites, 39 percent of Japanese, 41 percent of Chinese, and 66 percent of other immigrants spoke **no** English, as compared with less than 10 percent of foreign-born residents in 1990. A decade before New Mexico became a state in 1912, two-thirds of its residents remained monolingual speakers of Spanish or Native American languages. Meanwhile, significant enclaves of French speakers remained intact in Louisiana and northern New England. German still predominated in large areas of the upper Midwest. These groups gradually became Anglicized – not through legislation, but through social changes due to industrialization, migration, road-building, electrification, mass media, and the passing of isolated rural life.

These assimilative forces are even more powerful today. There is no evidence that bilingual accommodations slow down English acquisition. Absolutely none has been marshalled by English Only advocates – only unsupported claims about ethnic separatism and immigrants' disinclination to learn English unless forced to do so.

[Demographic research](#) shows that now, more than ever, language patterns in America are a case of "Babel in reverse." [<1>](#) A massive shift to English continues. This trend has been somewhat masked by rising immigration levels over the past two decades, following half a century of restrictive quotas. So it is not surprising that many Americans have trouble grasping the paradox: While the number of minority language speakers is increasing, so is the rate of linguistic assimilation. All available evidence suggests that today's newcomers are learning English – and losing their native tongues – **more rapidly** than ever before. English was far more "threatened" in earlier times; yet it survived quite nicely without official status.

About a third of the world's nation-states have official language provisions in their constitutions. But few of these designate a single language for government. Some do so at enormous cost to civil liberties – Turkey, for example, has criminalized minority language usage in many contexts. Others elevate a single national language for purely symbolic, ceremonial purposes. But a larger number of constitutions include explicit provisions for minority rights, giving official status to more than one language. In practice, some of these guarantees are faithfully observed; some are ignored. Elsewhere language laws serve a planning function, for example, in post-colonial nations that remain linguistically diverse. Or they may seek to mediate ethnic rivalries.

In sum, it is impossible to generalize about the meaning of an official language. Political contexts vary enormously. It would mean one thing for a small "unilingual" country – Iceland, let's say – to declare an official language as an emblem of national pride. It would mean quite another for the United States to do so, where the political impact would be to restrict and denigrate minority tongues that already are subordinate to English. And recently, it meant something else again when the colony of Puerto Rico ended its official bilingualism, imposed by military force in 1902, in favor of Spanish as its sole official language. (The new policy lasted barely two years, an indication of its unique political subtext: combat between Puerto Rico's statehood and "commonwealth" forces.)

All this is not to say the United States should have no [language policy](#). Quite the contrary. Now more than ever we need a comprehensive plan for managing language resources and ensuring language rights. But such a policy involves much more than simply designating an official tongue.

1. Einar Haugen, *The Ecology of Languages* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1972).