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La Problema Lengua:

Embracing Linguistic Pluralism for a Richer “American” Experience

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Introduction

In a fifth-grade classroom in Queens, Mr. Andrew Brown's students are speaking English, Spanish, Arabic, Polish, and Ukrainian. This class is located within a public school, not at a special language school, or even a magnet school. Mr. Brown is required to carefully balance the needs of students ranging from monolingual English-speaking students who struggle with reading, to newly-arrived students with little command of English from Central America. Mr. Brown uses reading, writing, and oral communication strategies across languages within his classroom, which promotes an intercultural interaction known as *translanguaging*. This classroom well reflects the sights and sounds of its geographical context. Located within Queens, and one of the most linguistically diverse neighborhoods in the world, the majority of students at this school are bilingual, speaking a language other than English at home (Garcia & Kleyn, 2016, pgs. 83-87).

This school is unlike most others in its approach to addressing the needs of its multilingual students. In fact, in most parts of the US, English language learners (ELLs) are judged based on the same metrics as native English speakers, creating inequity within measured educational attainment standards among students.

Students who are immigrants themselves or children of immigrants are exposed to formal schooling where they are immersed in English writing and communication for seven hours a day. These children are better equipped to learn English faster than their parents, who are more likely to be employed in professions without significant opportunities to communicate with other English speakers (Camarota and Zeigler, *Jobs Americans Won't Do? A Detailed Look at*

Immigrant Employment by Occupation). Therefore, in the long run, immigrant children are equipped to become more successful overall after arriving in the US than adults who resettle here. Strong English language skills are correlated with all possible measures of immigrant success (Bergson-Shilcock and Witte). However, what is to be said about the outcomes of success for adult immigrants in the short-term? Are these immigrants entitled to linguistically supportive environments like that of Mr. Brown's *translanguaging* classroom, or is the onus on them to learn English in other ways?

Because immigrants are often immersed in work environments where their ability to express themselves or understand others is stifled, they are pressured unfairly by native English speakers to learn the language in order to better assimilate into society. In a country with no official language, all people should be encouraged to develop skills in multiple languages. However, anglophone dominance on the North American continent has relegated native English speakers into monolingual ignorance and stifles the ability of immigrants to pursue success. Linguistic imperatives feed a culture that stokes anti-immigrant attitudes. Public policy must address the racist and discriminatory culture created by anglophone dominance, instead of continuing to perpetuate it. This paper addresses how public policy should respond to the "immigration problem," where the "immigration problem" is defined as the challenge of a racist monolingual culture that subjugates immigrants and English-language learners.

This paper draws upon published research to examine the policy problem through the cultural theory. The system that produces language legislation is only part of historical cycles of immigration flows. These cycles have produced marginalization and attempted cultural erasure at many points in history, where racial discrimination against German and Chinese immigrants has

been compared to the situation of millions of Latinx Americans today. These policies are best examined through culture and context.

Background

Thomas Paine in the late 18th century called America the “asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe” (“Immigration Timeline”). Beginning in 1790 with Congress’s Naturalization Act, immigration in the US has always been biased towards white individuals. The act states that “...any alien, being a free white person, may be admitted to become a citizen of the US” (“Immigration Timeline”). It is important to examine the rhetoric used within immigration policy and the ways in which the laws themselves have contributed to the othering of non-white groups, setting the foundation for today’s immigration problem. After the War of 1812, immigration into the US from Britain, Ireland, and Western Europe skyrocketed. These immigrants overwhelmingly settled on the east coast in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston.

Westward expansion brought with it the largest wave of some of America’s first non-European immigrants. Nearly one century after the Naturalization Act, many Asian immigrants came through California in the years following the Civil War (1865-1869) to work on the transcontinental railroad (Chang and Fisher Fishkin). With this wave of immigrants came discriminatory region-specific immigration quotas and bans such as the Chinese Exclusion Act. Political power was always controlled by English-speaking white people in the US. Therefore, it was always white anglophones controlling the flows of immigrants, establishing a precedence of subjugating non-European-rooted languages and cultures.

English in this country has dominated for so long that it was never necessary for the federal government to protect with policy. While in 1890, 4.5 times as many Americans were

non-English speakers, this only accounted for 3.6 percent of Americans (Crawford). In 1990, 0.8 percent of Americans did not speak English well. The standard in the US was to not have a policy protecting or concerning language. James Crawford poses questions in his book *At War with Diversity*, asking about the social and ideological roots of movements to promote the exclusive use of English within the US. “English-only” movements are rooted more in ethnocentrism than in the construction of an “American identity” that includes English and English only as its communicative tool (Crawford). While traditionally, language is regarded as a way to establish a connection with others, examples of linguistic imperatives demonstrate that language and differences therein act as barriers between people, especially when they belong to differing ethnic groups.

Neighboring Example

As demonstrated in Québec, language imperatives have caused controversy within society and animosity between linguistic majorities & minorities. Québec’s Bill 101 – language imperative legislation supporting the francization of schools, commerce, and the workplace – had wide-reaching implications throughout Canada. Before the 1960s, Montréal was Canada’s largest city. However, after leaning firmly into Québec’s language imperative as the savior of French language and culture, the city was too unstable at the hands of French-separatists in the mid-twentieth century to host Canada’s most important financial institutions as it had for decades before. Therefore, in the mid-to-late twentieth century, large banks fled Montréal in favor of Toronto, which subsequently became Canada’s largest city and financial capital. Fears over the

threat of English dominance crippled an entire region's economic growth to fall behind that of all other Canadian cities (Hadekel).

Conversely, Jean Dorion, a top government official in charge of implementing the charter, declared that without the language bill, "Montreal would be an English-speaking city predominantly right now" (Laframboise). Political leaders claim the legislation's greatest achievement was providing young non-francophones the ability to better integrate into Québec's French-speaking society, but the bill also caused the flight of many established non-French speaking Quebecers. While the bill helped students better familiarize themselves with the French language, the question still remains: are adult immigrants entitled to linguistically supportive environments in the same ways that children are? While the bill has succeeded in protecting French language and culture in the province, it has also contributed to economic decline and hardship for many non-francophones, both permanent residents and immigrants alike. In this example, the language imperative alienated many immigrant adults and children, while cementing an unwelcoming business climate.

Public policy choices are not made in a vacuum. The timeline leading to Québec's Bill 101 was a long and contentious battle of subjugation and interplay between the English and French languages. Is English in the US under a similar threat? Considering less than one percent of Americans claim they do not speak English well (Crawford), it is not. However, the media has long warned that white people in the US are soon to be outnumbered by people of color. As minorities are poised to outnumber white people in the US by the year 2045, it will be crucial to examine supportive infrastructure for the country's shifting demographics, especially as Hispanic/Latinx populations show the highest growth rates (Frey; Schaeffer). While America as

a whole has never experienced the contentious suppression of language and culture as the French in Québec did under British rule, current population trends and media fearmongering could potentially incite a backlash leading to codification of an official language.

Applying Cultural Theory

Examining language policies through the cultural theory is only possible upon examining the predominant culture within which US policymakers and actors reside. While non-whites in this country make up 38% of its population, 19% of voting members in the 115th Congress (2017-2019) were non-white. By comparison, in 1981 when 20% of Americans were non-white, only 6% of voting Congressional members were not white (Bialik and Krogstad). Through a lens of overwhelmingly white and mostly monolingual policy actors, this culture surrounding language has interacted with both dated and contemporary factors that have created an unsupportive language learning environment for adult immigrants. Because the prevailing policy choice – dating from colonial times – was to not have a policy on language, the language debate followed the majority – or at least those with power within the majority. Over time, prevailing social norms forced immigrants into schemes of assimilation. There are countless stories of immigrant families across the US from places like eastern and southern Europe whose names have changed to shield their immigrant status. Today’s media have propagated myths infiltrating America’s public consciousness, causing people to believe that language is under attack.

For example, the state of California passed Proposition 227, the “English in Public Schools” initiative. Proposition 227 eliminated bilingual classes for students with limited English proficiency and limited the amount of time students spend in special classes. By dismantling

support for bilingual children, lawmakers sent a very clear message to citizens: the state does not support bilingual education.

Symbols

Some of the most poignant features of cultures are their symbols. While symbols include icons, graphic depictions, and other visual factors that contribute to the construction of a culture, not much can effectively symbolize the culture of a language. The theory of linguistic relativity – the idea that the specific language(s) we speak affect the ways in which we think (Athanasopoulos et al.; Pavlenko) – is highly contested by linguists. Though it is contested, I argue that it serves as a symbol. This idea, when considered alongside racism and xenophobia, provides a basis from which we can understand the historical othering of multilinguals in the US. In this instance, language was a tool used by white English speakers to justify racist and exclusionary behaviors. In the mid-twentieth century in the US, bilingualism was both uncommon and perceived to be unusual (Pavlenko). Unfortunately, this attitude has yet to fundamentally change. Immersion within a monolingual society has kept most Americans from interacting authentically with people outside of the sphere of English. This society remains unsympathetic to the situation of ELL's, and those with political power on both sides lack an idea of how to effectively address the policy problem, even though they are often the ones charged with these decisions.

In Brenda Shaffer's *The Limits of Culture*, Shaffer posits that policy driven by culture must be proven by “culturally-based goal[s] [colliding] with basic material interests of either the state or its ruling elite” (Shaffer). Besides the self-serving nature of subjugating non-white

people, cultural elites in the US have crafted laws to the benefit of white people, especially as immigration is concerned.

Factors that contribute to people having less favorable attitudes towards bilingualism include low income, low labor market status, living in areas with high unemployment, and negative racial attitudes about the Latinx population (Shin et al.). These characteristics are highly reflective of America's Republican party, full of Americans spread across America's vast terrain in small towns dotting the landscape. Conversely, much of America's economic elite belong to the same party, and control the public policy process either as official or unofficial actors (by way of lobbying or Political Action Committees). According to the same study, factors contributing to favorable attitudes towards bilingualism include having Latinx friends or acquaintances, exposure to foreign languages, and speaking a non-English language (Shin et al.). The researchers hypothesize that as the perceived size of the Latinx population in this country increases, the more attitudes towards bilingualism will sour.

Although many narratives pushed through the media have painted the picture that immigrants (especially Latinx immigrants) come to the US, refuse to speak English, and gather in low-income ethnic enclaves to avoid English, this characterization is untrue. While many immigrants gather in neighborhoods with other immigrants, it is due to the fact that they are relegated to such neighborhoods by a lack of initial financial resources and lack of familiarity with English. It is also the affinity of people to gather in like groups with shared traditions, not avoidance of English, that also contributes to gathering among linguistic groups. Research has shown Mexican immigrants do not refuse to learn English, despite what is said by media sources

(Dowling et al.). The narrative espoused by many that immigrants refuse to integrate, while incorrect, has yet to be rectified.

How Public Policy Should Address the Problem

All levels of public policy (local, state, and federal) have ways in which they should address the policy problem. The problem is rooted within a culture of discrimination and racism against non-whites. The US has more Spanish speakers than the entire country of Spain. Forty-seven percent of New Mexico's population speaks Spanish, while 38% of California and Texas residents speak Spanish. They are followed by Arizona, Nevada, and Florida as the states with the highest percentages of Spanish speakers (Perez). States and local governments must recognize regionally relevant languages (such as Spanish in the aforementioned states) and ensure institutional support to immigrants. Access to Spanish-speaking health professionals, bankers, social workers, and others within commerce are important to immigrants and others alike. Particular attention must be paid on the local level to ensure that immigrants all over the country, even outside of immigrant gateways, are supported.

Addressing Fred Genesee's work regarding bilingualism, public policy must acknowledge and promote the presence of other "national languages" (Genesee). In the Sun Belt especially, where immigration from Spanish-speaking countries is highest (Camarota and Zeigler, "Immigrants in the United States"), the government should promote policies of bilingualism and proficiency among all citizens in important regional languages. Justified by the premise that exposure to other languages causes favorable attitudes towards bilingualism (Shin et al.), this supports the proposed cultural change necessary to dismantle anti-immigrant attitudes in

the US. A case study available to test this assumption would be Montréal, where many services are available in both French and English. Clients dictate which language they prefer service from by either responding “Bonjour” (for French) or “Hi” (for English) to the customary greeting “Bonjour-Hi.”

Public policy must also address the unsupportive culture harbored towards immigrants. Policy can do so by further legitimizing the role of Spanish speakers (and all immigrants) in society as more than agricultural laborers and service industry workers. An unorthodox method at legitimization would include supporting positive and non-stereotypical Latinx depictions in media – from books to news broadcasts, all the way to TV and film. Introducing America to positive depictions of Spanish speakers in the country can slowly begin to dismantle an antagonistic culture towards Spanish speakers that has prevailed for so long. It is the hope that by recognizing and legitimizing the presence of Spanish in the US, public policy will be better equipped to support Spanish speaking adults in similar ways to policy supporting children.

Conclusion

While public policy cannot recreate the conditions of Mr. Brown’s classroom for adults, public policy can address the cultural construction of language within US borders. By examining historical and cultural factors shaping linguistic tradition in North America, this paper proposes that policy must acknowledge and support linguistic pluralism. In understanding America’s racist and discriminatory history with immigrants, public policy must dismantle the culture derived from this history to foster a more supportive linguistic environment for immigrants. As a nation

of immigrants, there is work to do to confirm today's immigrants are well-equipped with the tools of success, just as white immigrants have been for centuries.

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