Babel in America; or, The Politics of Language Diversity in the United States

Marc Shell

What really is the language of the United States?

The common American response to this question is to dismiss it as outlandishly naive and as lacking cultural or political significance. After all, isn’t the United States, that land of immigrants, fundamentally English-speaking, or essentially anglophone? Didn’t founder John Jay, for example, insist in the Federalist Papers “that Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country, to one united people . . . speaking the same language”? And isn’t America’s linguistic union one of the great historical feats of social language-engineering?

The familiar rhetoric of inevitable linguistic union ranges from the humorous to the imperialismically oppressive. (“Melting pot, yes. Tower of Babel, no!” is the saying.) And it still informs manifestly most studies

1. John Jay writes “that Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country, to one united people; a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion” (Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, The Federalist Papers: A Collection of Essays Written in Support of the Constitution of the United States, ed. Roy P. Fairfield [Garden City, N.Y., 1966], p. 6).

2. In this essay, I use the terms America and United States as near synonyms while at the same time examining the international and intranational political significance of how the rhetoric of the term American—indicating here the English language as spoken in the United States—takes the part for the whole (the United States for the Americas North and South, for example) or the one for the many (anglophone unilingualism for plurilingualism).

3. Saul Bellow is perhaps wrongly reported to have said this about the goals of U.S. English, a group bent on making English the one and only official language of the U.S. Bellow has said that he is not a member of U.S. English (quoted in S. I. Hayakawa, One
of the politics of language in America and histories of the anglicization of America. That rhetoric serves, as we shall see, to obscure or explain away the facts that the revolutionary colonies were markedly polyglot, that neither the Constitution of the United States nor other such official documents name an official language, and that there is a crucial dialogue, nowadays generally submerged but nevertheless ready to surface, about whether the United States should have an official language—or several official languages—and, if so, which one.

What, besides the predilection to confuse America with the world before Babel, impels Americans to take the fiction of original American monoglottism for the reality of American polyglottism? What is the link between the impressive bilingualism of America's former population and its current population's high rate of illiteracy in even one language?


4. The telling silence about official language in America characterizes analyses from the left and right sides of the political spectrum. Both sides assume the hegemony of English as a fact of life and define the politics of language in the United States mainly in terms of the characteristics of a specifically American English. Among such analysts are Michael P. Kramer, Imagining Language in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War (Princeton, N.J., 1992), and David Simpson, The Politics of American English 1776–1850 (New York, 1986); they fail to consider fully the significance of America's polyglot past and its unofficially official monoglotal present.


6. However, it is worth recalling the following extenuating factors: (1) Various treaties with the Indians and the Spanish seem to have meant to guarantee some sort of official language parity with English; (2) the Constitution was translated into other languages; (3) as discussed below (section 7), in our own century there have been movements to make English the one official language. For translation of the Constitution into French, see Benjamin Franklin, letter to Robert R. Livingston, 22 July 1783, Franklin: Writings, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay (New York, 1987), p. 1071.

1. Many Languages

The actual linguistic makeup of people inside and outside the often changing borders of the American colonies between 1750 and 1850 is relevant here. For if ever there were a polyglot place on the globe—other than Babel’s spire—this was it. Here three continents—North America, Africa, and Europe—met one another. This is the polyglot situation in America that, in 1789, Frenchmen reported.8

Inside the colonies at the time, there were not so many native English speakers as generally assumed. First, non-English European settlers made up one quarter of the total white population.9 (Two-fifths of Pennsylvania’s population alone spoke German.)10 Second, the languages of the Amerindian populations—called “Aborigines” by George Washington11—were numerous and widespread.12 Third were the blacks, mostly slaves, with their many African languages, who numbered more than one-fifth of the total population.13 (Had a slave the courage to speak his native language, punishment was sometimes severe; there are reports of blacks having their tongues removed.)

Outside the colonies too there were mostly non-English speakers, principally the various Amerindians and next the French and Spanish. Hence Thomas Jefferson suggested that Americans should travel to Canada in order to acquire a knowledge of French, and he emphasized that Spanish was an important influence in the New World. Of course, Jeffer-

7. And later Asia.
12. Their numbers, though probably great, are not known because the official census reports for Amerindians were ludicrously and inaccurately low.
13. For black population figures, see Lisa A. Bull, “The Negro,” in The Ethnic Contribution to the American Revolution, ed. Frederick Harling and Martin Kaufman (Westfield, Mass., 1976), pp. 67–74. The study of the process whereby slaves lost their various tribal languages (hence also a comparative history of those languages) has yet to be fully undertaken; but see Daniel C. Littlefield, Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina (Baton Rouge, La., 1981), and Guion Griffis Johnson, A Social History of the Sea Islands, with Special Reference to St. Helena Island, South Carolina (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1930), pp. 77–78.
son’s internationalist pose was partly a short-term strategy for a border-changing, expansionist period. After the Louisiana Purchase (1803)—under President Jefferson—francophones were Americanized. A later example is the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848). By this treaty Mexico ceded almost half its territory to the United States, and language rights were supposed to devolve to the newly Americanized Spanish-speaking population. (It is worth comparing here the language rights guaranteed to francophone Catholics by the British North America Act of 1867, which was for a century or more Canada’s constitutive document.)

2. One Language

The polyglot situation in the newly constituted United States had its problems. How could people of one language get along with others? Thus Thomas Paine wrote, “if there is a country in the world where concord, according to common calculation, would be least expected, it is America. Made up, as it is, of people . . . speaking different languages.”

Concern for commercial and political concord, as well as an “enlightenment” search for affinity among languages or for a universal language—abetted by American missionaries’ and presidents’ research into Amerindian languages—led to discussion, still itself little researched, about the need or desire to have only one language in America. A principal purpose of this research into the diversity of languages was thus generally to foster linguistic homogeneity rather than to encourage linguistic heterogeneity.

The chief question was, of course, what one language should predominate in America. The factors that militated for English are well

15. By 1878 in New Mexico and Arizona—after the large influx of English speakers during the gold rush—Spanish language rights, if ever they existed, were rescinded. See Rodolfo Acuña, Occupied America: The Chicano’s Struggle toward Liberation (San Francisco, 1972), p. 104.
17. See note 20 below.
18. The European settlers, including Thomas Jefferson, researched myriad languages of the Amerindians. See Alexander F. Chamberlain, “Thomas Jefferson’s Ethnological Opinions and Activities,” American Anthropologist 9 (July–Sept. 1907): 499–509. George Washington, in a letter to Lafayette with which he included a Vocabulary of the Shawanese and Delaware Languages compiled by Richard Butler, wrote that “to know the affinity of tongues seems to be one step toward promoting the affinity of nations” (Washington, letter to Lafayette, 10 Jan. 1788, p. 374). The compilers of Indian vocabularies were generally either military men or missionaries; Washington also sent Lafayette a book about Delaware Indian (and English) “spellings” by the Reverend David Zeisberger, a Moravian missionary (see ibid., p. 377). See also below, section 6, on the Amerindian languages.
known. The commercially dominant plurality of people were English speakers schooled in the rhetoric of the British Empire, and many believed in the manifest destiny of their own tongue. Not a few figured that English would soon become something like what Latin had been among Catholics or European intellectuals: a universal language.19 In a letter to Noah Webster, Benjamin Franklin thus noted that one day English would outflank French as the universal secular language.20

But there were also factors that militated against English. Thus some American republicans argued that independence from England—and from British imperialism—required independence from English. This notion, with its shades of English anti-Normanism, led to discussion of several strategies.21 Some of these may seem bizarre, as we shall see, but the outlandishly successful social language-engineering projects in our own century—the miraculous Israeli renaissance of Hebrew, say, and the imperialist Russification of the Soviet colonies22—suggest that very few

19. Thomas Paine reminds us of the religious aspect to the problem of unilingualism. He recalls the situation of Jesus: "But how was Jesus Christ to make anything known to all nations? He could speak but one language, which was Hebrew, and there are in the world several hundred languages. Scarcely any two nations speak the same language, or understand each other; and as to translations, every man who knows anything of languages knows that it is impossible to translate from one language into another, not only without losing a great part of the original, but frequently mistaking the sense" (Thomas Paine, The Age of Reason, in The Life and Works of Thomas Paine, ed. William M. Van der Weyde, 10 vols. [New Rochelle, N.Y., 1925], 8:42). Saint Paul, that great traveler, might say that in the New Dispensation there will be no longer Hebrew or Greek; but language differences are not transcended—except in silence or, in the "old" elevation, as uniquely sacred Hebrew (among the Jews) and, in the "new" elevation, as Roman imperial Latin or Christian Church Latin.

20. Franklin, noting that the universal language of the eighteenth century was French, wrote that "our English bids fair to obtain the second Place" and expressed the conviction that one day it would be English that would be first (Franklin, letter to Noah Webster, 26 Dec. 1789, Franklin, p. 1175).

21. The English colonists' rebellious discussions of ridding the United States of the English language and concomitant English political institutions were themselves variations of English nationalist demands, common since Anglo-Norman times, that the English language be purged of its "foreign" elements, chiefly Norman, and that pure English become, as Edmund Spenser puts it, "the kingdom of our own language" (quoted in Richard Helgerson, Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England [Chicago, 1992], p. 25). Hugh MacDougall points out that John Hare had argued for freedom from French, saying that English usages—and constitutive laws—of Norman origin should be "devested of their French rages . . . be restored into the ["original"] English or Latin tongue." All French words should be purged from the language and replaced with words and terms "from the old Saxon and the learned tongues" (Hugh A. MacDougall, Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons [Montréal, 1992], p. 61).

22. Concerning Stalin's Soviet empire: The political underdog generally conflates oppression by a conquering people with oppression by that people's language. Likewise the conqueror often argues that no language is inherently—that is, lexically or syntactically—oppressive. Stalin led a murderous experiment in social language-engineering and argued implicitly, in Marxism and Linguistics, that a new Russian unilingualism would help destroy economic inequalities. See Joseph Stalin, Marxism and Linguistics, trans. Margaret Schlauch (New York, 1951).
strategic proposals were preposterous and that all speak eloquently of their designers’ hopes and fears.

First was the idea of starting a new language—something like Esperanto or Boontling (a unique language experiment in a California town). The Quarterly Review commented, “Nor have [Americans] been wanting projects among them for getting rid of the English language... by substituting a new language of their own.” Second was the idea of the renaissance of an ancient language. Here Hebrew and Greek played roles. Concerning Hebrew—the language of that other “chosen people” (G, p. 12), founders of the famously tolerant and much discussed ancient “Hebrew commonwealth”—one Frenchman, the Marquis de Chastellux, reported in the 1780s that “the Americans have carried [their anti-British aversion] so far, as seriously to propose introducing a new language; and some persons were desirous, for the convenience of the public, that the Hebrew should be substituted for the English. The proposal was, that it should be taught in the schools, and made use of in all public acts” (quoted in G, p. 12). Concerning ancient Greek, Charles Astor Bristed wrote in 1855 that “it is still on record that a legislator seriously proposed that the young republic should complete its independence by adopting a different language from that of the mother-country, ‘the Greek for instance,’ which proposition was summarily extinguished by a suggestion of a fellow representative [Roger Sherman of Connecticut, delegate to the Continental Congress and a member of the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence] that ‘it would be more convenient for us to keep the language as it was, and make the English speak Greek’” (quoted in G, pp. 12–13). Third were the modern languages. Among these was French, of which the etymologist Herbert Croft wrote in 1797 (in his A Letter from Germany to the Princess Royal of England, published in Hamburg) that “during the American revolution, the idea was started of revenging themselves on England, by rejecting its language and adopting that of France” (quoted in G, p. 12). And there was German, whose experience in the United States belies the widespread belief in America that there were no serious attempts to make the country or its states officially bilingual.

23. Boontling was spoken from 1880 to 1920 in the area near Boonville (in northern California); it was not intelligible to outsiders. See Charles C. Adams, Boontling: An American Lingo (Austin, Tex., 1971).

24. Quoted in Dennis E. Baron, Grammar and Good Taste: Reforming the American Language (New Haven, Conn., 1982), p. 12; hereafter abbreviated G.

25. On ideas about the commonwealth in England and Amsterdam in the seventeenth century, see Marc Shell, “Marranos (Pigs), or from Coexistence to Toleration,” Critical In- quiry 17 (Winter 1991): 306–35.

26. For an example of the myth: “Despite persistent folklore promulgated by subsequent writers, there were no serious attempts to adopt some language other than English for the new nation” (Bailey, Images of English, p. 104).
3. Official German

A brief history of the controversies surrounding German as official American language might begin with the biography of that quintessential American, Benjamin Franklin, ace newspaper publisher, book seller, and editor of the *The New England Courant*. He opened his own printing shop in 1724, at age eighteen, and operated the *Pennsylvania Gazette* as proprietor at twenty-three. In the early 1730s Franklin taught himself French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Latin. And he would seem to have believed enough in multilingualism to publish in 1732 the first German-language newspaper in North America, the *Philadelphische Zeitung*.27

However, Franklin's German newspaper failed, and “a better qualified German printer” cornered the German book market. The failure may have been critical for the subsequent linguistic history of Pennsylvania—if not the entire continent. Forever thereafter Franklin’s writings about American “foreign”-language speakers took a sharply xenophobic turn. In 1750, for example, he complained that Pennsylvania “will in a few Years become a German colony: Instead of their Learning our Language, we must learn their’s, or live as in a foreign Country.”28 In “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind” (1751), he grumbled likewise about “Palatine Boors” who “swarm into our Settlements and . . . establish their Language”; he asked, “Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifyng them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs any more than they can acquire our Complexion?” (“O,” p. 401).29 Even in 1784, in the face of the considerable distrust of Englishmen that one would expect in the revolutionary period, Franklin complained about “Foreigners of all Nations and Languages, who by their Numbers may drown and stifle the English,” and he argued that only with such immigration of Englishmen would English “become in the course of


29. See Franklin’s diatribe against the Germans in a letter to Peter Collinson, 9 May 1758, The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, 4:479–86. In the same tradition as Franklin, William Smith wrote in 1755 that “I know nothing that will hinder them, either from soon being able to give us Law and Language, or else, by joining with the French, to eject all the English Inhabitants” (quoted in “O,” p. 402).
two Centuries the most extensive Language in the World, the Spanish only excepted."  

It is unclear how much influence Franklin had, or how many shared his views. But, whether thanks to English speakers’ fear of another language’s parity with English or to non-English speakers’ desire for it, stories, with at least a germ of truth, began to circulate about how one or another language, usually German, “almost” became official. A Congressional committee recommended that “‘it will be necessary that the laws be translated, and printed in the German language’” (“O,” p. 399). And an American German book reported about attempts at German language parity in Pennsylvania that “in the vote on this question: whether the dominant speech in the Assembly, in the courts, and in the records of Pennsylvania should be the German language—the votes were tied” (quoted in “O,” p. 395).  

The German language remained a strong, unofficial presence in the United States throughout the nineteenth century. Many argued that anglophone Americans should learn German and endorsed the view of Benjamin Rush, who argued that there should be a German-language college, and bilingual schools were not unusual. But thanks partly to the hostilities of World War I and fears of a third column, anti-German and isolationist sentiment was strengthened. In 1916 it was made illegal by law.  

30. Franklin, letter to William Strahan, 19 Aug. 1784, Franklin, p. 1102. Franklin offers the Irish of Pennsylvania as an example of how a minority group can dominate the government.  

31. The committee recommendation followed an incident in the Third Congress of the United States: “‘a petition of a number of Germans, residing in the State of Virginia’ was presented to the House of Representatives . . . ‘praying that a certain proportion of the laws of the United States may be printed in the German language’” (“O,” p. 398).  

32. In this same book the author, Franz Löhner, says that “half of them [in the Assembly] were for the introduction of the German language, and this was certainly of great importance when one considers that here it was a question of making a German state where English had previously been the official language. Then the speaker of the Assembly, a Muhlenberg, through his vote, gave the decision in favor of the English language” (“O,” p. 395). What was “involved was a request, made by a group of Virginia Germans, to have certain laws issued in German as well as in English. The proposal was rejected by [only] one vote” (David Crystal, Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language [Cambridge, 1987], p. 365). See also Heath and Frederick Mandabach, “Language Status Decisions and the Law in the United States,” in Progress in Language Planning, ed. Juan Cobarrius and Joshua A. Fishman (Berlin, 1983), pp. 87–105.  

33. Joseph Ehrenfried argued in 1834 that “the prevalence of the German language in many parts of the United States should form a powerful inducement of men in every situation of life to become, at least partially acquainted with it” (quoted by Heath, “English in Our Language Heritage,” p. 11).  

even to teach many foreign languages in American schools! President Theodore Roosevelt, in his still influential 1917 appeal called "The Children of the Crucible," said that "we must . . . have but one language. That must be the language of the Declaration of Independence."

The problem was partly one of "language loyalty." Roosevelt, characterizing all Americans as willing immigrants, did not consider that blacks and Amerindians were, one way or another, conquered peoples. Nor did he mention the French, whose territory was bought from under them, nor the Dutch and Germans, who had been settlers before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. More tellingly, Roosevelt did not consider the Spanish, for whom the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo might have involved official language rights, or the bilingual constitution of New Mexico (1912), which actually partly provided those rights. (During debates in 1878 about whether the Spanish territories should become states, Spanish-Americans had been called simply "foreigners," but when the state constitution of New Mexico was finally ratified in 1912, Spanish-Americans were promised official language rights on a two-decade "trial basis.") About these matters Roosevelt remained as silent as are most Americans—both anglophone and Spanish speaking—today.

35. See Edward Sagarin and Robert J. Kelly, "Polylingualism in the United States of America: A Multitude of Tongues amid a Monolingual Majority," in Language Policy and National Unity, ed. William R. Beer and James E. Jacob (Totowa, N. J., 1985), pp. 20–44. One might also consider here the conflict between the Germanic (Hegelian) philosophers of Missouri (as well as Ohio and Chicago) and the New England transcendentalists. See Carl Witte, German-Americans and the World War with Special Emphasis on Ohio’s German-Language Press (Columbus, Ohio, 1936). On the bilingual German schools, see Carolyn Toth, German-English Bilingual Schools in America: The Cincinnati Tradition in Historical Context (New York, 1990).

36. Roosevelt continued, "The greatness of this nation depends on the swift assimilation of the aliens she welcomes to her shores" (Theodore Roosevelt, "The Children of the Crucible," excerpted as "One Flag, One Language," in Language Loyalties, p. 85).


38. On the long-term use of "Dutch" elsewhere than in Pennsylvania, see Philip E. Webber, Pella Dutch: The Portrait of a Language and Its Use in One of Iowa’s Ethnic Communities (Ames, Iowa, 1988) and various linguistic histories of New York, once called "New Amsterdam."

39. Thus we read in the record:

Mr. Tinnin: We have here in the Capitol now tons and tons of documents published in Spanish for the benefit of foreigners.

Mr. Rolfe: Do you call the native population of this State foreigners?

[Quoted in Language Loyalties, p. 53]

40. See U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, The Excluded Student: Educational Practices Affecting Mexican Americans in the Southwest, excerpted as "Language Rights and New Mexico Statehood," in Language Loyalties, p. 62. On the bilingualism of the older New Mexico constitutions, see New Mexico’s constitutions in vol. 3 of Constitutions of the United States, National and State, 2d ed., eds. Mark Chen and F. Grad (New York, 1990), and Dorothy Cline, New
President Roosevelt’s wartime ideology—that the United States has to have only one language just as it has one flag and that this language must be English—has remained the effective unofficial view of America’s political officers ever since. But, of course, more than the wartime xenophobia of World War I explains how the unofficial culture of English as the one official American language gained its considerable influence.

4. Non-English and Dialect

Since 1750, we have seen, there had been a dialogue about whether there should be only one official language and which language that should be: English or one of the “foreign,” that is, non-English languages, whether ancient or modern. That dialogue, barely recognizable, was sometimes expressed in the form of literary debates about whether the American language itself was not essentially a “foreign”—that is, non-English—language. This expression helps to explain the still-widespread phenomenon in America of treating the politics of language mainly in terms of changes, called politically symptomatic, to the English language. This phenomenon, like so much else, served to divert attention from the question of an official or national language.

To begin with, the view that the American language ought to become something essentially other than the English language seemed to involve notions about fundamental lexis, syntax, and even truth. Early on, William Thornton wrote in Cadmus that American English should become a language of new political truth: “You have corrected the dangerous doctrines of European powers, correct now the language you have imported . . . The AMERICAN LANGUAGE will thus be as distinct as the government, free from all the follies of unphilosophical fashion, and resting upon truth as its only regulator.” But James Herron saw, in the polyglot heritage of the new republic, the possibility of creating a new language. Thus he wrote in American Grammar that “we express our own free thoughts in language our own, adopted from the tongues of the many nations, of our

Mexico’s 1910 Constitution: A Nineteenth-Century Product (Santa Fe, N. Mex., 1985). The bilingual provision was renewed in 1931 and 1943 but was apparently omitted in 1949.


forefathers. . . . Consequently, language in the United States is Poly-
glot—national with our people—not borrowed from any one distinct
tongue” (quoted in G, p. 14). In this polyglot tradition, Noah Webster
claimed that the United States “will produce, in a course of time, a lan-
guage in North America, as different from the future language of Eng-
land, as the modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from German, or
from one another.”

Webster was wrong about this. And just why America did not develop
as Webster envisioned is an interesting question in “sociolinguistics.” Yet
the thought of an apparently non-English American language emerging
from polyglot populations in America was no more exotic than that of
the United States or one of its states—say, Pennsylvania (German) or New
Mexico (Spanish)—becoming officially bilingual. Moreover, the Ameri-
canist “assimilationist” vision of the “natural” metamorphosis of one lan-
guage into another language—that is, the hypothesis of an American En-
glish language that would be both “foreign” and “familiar” to English—
made it easier to forget the question, Why should English predominate?
Now it could be said that it was not English that ruled, or would soon
rule, but some new language.

In the ensuing years, Webster and his followers came to realize that
the English language would predominate, or they now argued outright
that it should. (The revisionist Webster now said that “our language is
the English and it is desirable that the language of the United States and
Great Britain should continue to be the same.”) And so, whereas once
it had been said that the declared political separation from the English
people meant also a linguistic separation from the English language, now
everything became merely a matter of practical (supposedly “fonetic”)
spellings and the like. Debate about official language was thus displaced
into questions of dialect and race. Dialect as such became a popular sub-
ject and medium for anglophone fiction writers in America—Irving, Poe,
Melville, Twain, and myriad others.

43. Quoted in Bailey, Images of English, p. 104. Webster also said that in the Federal
Procession there was “a scroll, containing the principles of a [new] Federal language” (Web-

44. Noah Webster, Dissertations on the English Language: With Notes, Historical and Critical,
excerpted as “Declaration of Linguistic Independence,” in Language Loyalties, p. 35 n. 33.
The two languages—English and American—should be the same, Webster wrote, “except
so far as local circumstances, laws and institutions shall require a few particularities in each
country” (ibid.).

45. Webster’s ideas for his “Federal English”—to which Adams, Franklin, Jefferson,
and Madison contributed their notions—were not so “revolutionary” as the “fonetic” pro-
nunciation-spellings used by some writers in France in the eighteenth century. William
Thornton’s proposed phonetic alphabet was sometimes discussed; see also Charles Jared
Ingersoll, Remarks on the Review of Inchinquin’s Letters (Boston, 1815), pp. 138–39; cited
in G, p. 12.
Comparing the language issue in an officially biracial United States and in an officially bilingual Québec may be helpful here for understanding the distinctive American linkage between dialect and race. Whereas in Québec the subject of dialect supplemented without supplanting that of language, in the unofficially monoglotal and officially biracial United States, an often-exclusive focus on dialect serves to mask the disappearance of actual languages.46 Whereas some Québécois call themselves the *nègres* of Canada, refuse to “speak white”47 (that is, English, *Franglais*, or *joual*—a quasi-dialect sometimes loosely translated as “French jive talk” or “French gumbo”), and try in various ways to return to “pure French,” the once legally defined “group” of American blacks lost its various “original mother tongues” and adopted its “master’s” language along with his religion. (The brutal Philomelan history has yet to be told thanks partly to a continuing failure on both sides—“white” and “black”—to acknowledge fully as their inheritance the effective conditions of American race slavery. The failure is abetted and masked by diversions into such interesting and otherwise important topical areas as Africanisms in American English,48 Gullah as an essentially African language rather than as an essentially English one,49 syntactic similarities be-

46. “As soon as I began to write,” Gérald Godin had written in *Parti pris* in 1965, “I realized that I was a barbarian, i.e. a foreigner, according to the etymological meaning of the term. My mother tongue was not French but *franglais*. I had to learn French almost as a foreign language” (quoted in Lise Gauvin, “From Octave Crémazie to Victor-Lévy Beaulieu: Language, Literature, and Ideology,” trans. Emma Henderson, *Yale French Studies*, no. 65 [1983]: 38–39). Gaston Miron discussed in 1973 the linguistic schizophrenia and alienation that informed the diseased cultural life of Québec; and briefly considering the “debilitating effects” of bilingual signs on the “purity” of the “French language,” he had called for a new “linguistic decolonization” (“Décoloniser la langue: Interview/témoignage avec Gaston Miron,” *Maintenant* 125 [Apr. 1973]: 12). Jacques Godbout had claimed similarly in 1975 that the “ideology” of *joual* was an “infantile disease of nationalism” (quoted in Gauvin, “From Crémazie to Victor-Lévy Beaulieu,” p. 43).


49. On Gullah as a “language” or “dialect,” see Charles W. Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana, Ill., 1984), and on some of its social implications,
tween Creole and African-American, and African-American bidialectalism.)

In Twain's properly unsettling and bidialectal Pudd'nhead Wilson, for example, the nursemother-slave Roxana looks white and is legally black (that is, she has one-sixteenth black blood), but she is treated as black because she speaks black. Similarly, Roxana's changeling "Tom Driscoll" (né Valet de Chambres, in the "malapropriated" French of Mississippi planters) looks white and is legally black (that is, he has one-thirty-second black blood), but he is treated as white because he talks white. Finally, Roxana's master's changeling "Valet de Chambres" (né Tom Driscoll) looks white and is legally white (he has fully white blood), but, even after everyone learns he is "really" white, he is treated as black and thinks of himself as black because he talks black. (America's often-prosperous elocution schools and best-selling elocution manuals offered to rid clients of just such foreign, regional, and black accents.) Spanish limpieza de sangre [blood purity], adapted to the needs of the distinctively American institution of race slavery, thus infected America's peculiarly unspoken rhetoric of "language purity."

---

50. See the views that "black English" is a type of Creole (Verb Phrase Patterns in Black English and Creole, ed. Walter E. Edwards and Donald Winford [Detroit, 1991]) and relevant views about its syntax (Edgar W. Schneider, Morphologische und syntaktische Variablen im amerikanischen Early Black English [Tuscaloosa, Fla., 1989]).


52. Compare David R. Sewell, Mark Twain's Languages: Discourse, Dialogue, and Linguistic Variety (Berkeley, 1987) and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices (New York, 1993). In his Uncle Remus stories, Joel Chandler Harris blended everyone—both "black" and "white"—into a society of dialectally like-speaking humanoid "brethren." (The word brer in such names as Brer Rabbit and Brer Bär means "brother.")

53. A few examples of early general manuals may be helpful here. Noah Webster's Grammatical Institute of the English language (Pt. 3), 3d ed. (Philadelphia, 1787) already included in its subtitle "rules in elocution, and directions for expressing the principal passions of the mind." John Walker's Elements of Elocution includes "copper-plates explaining the nature of accent" (Boston, 1810). John Frost's The American Speaker (Philadelphia, 1839) likewise announces its stress "on pronunciation, pauses, inflections, accent, and emphasis" and its goal "to improve the pupil in . . . recitation." See also William Russell, The American Elocutionist; Comprising 'Lessons in Enunciation', 'Exercises in Elocution', and 'Rudiments of Gesture' (Boston, 1844). Closer to Twain's period, see Alexander Melville Bell, Elocutionary Manual: The Principles of Elocution, 4th ed. (Salem, Mass., 1878), with its focus on, as its subtitle has it, "the principles of elocution, with exercises and notations for pronunciation, intonation, emphasis, gesture and emotional expression," and Loomis J. Campbell, The New Franklin Fourth Reader (New York, 1884).

54. See Shell, "Marranos (Pigs)."
5. Language and Race

Mon pays, ce n’est pas un pays, c’est l’hiver.

—GILLES VIGNEAULT

The rhetoric for speaking about language is, of course, often like that for race. The linguistic and natural historians’ terms for genus and species are thus often the same, and, as Charles Darwin puts it, “the proofs that [different languages and distinct species] have been developed through a gradual process, are curiously the same.” Despite various intelligent protests about this rhetoric, nineteenth-century ideologies of linguistic historiography (Grimm), in their dialects of universal-particular and terminus-origin, differ little from those of species historiography (Darwin) or racial historiography (Gobineau). The common

55. Even the term Arya, once applied only to language families—as in Thomas Young’s article in The Quarterly Review (1813)—came to be applied also to biological groupings. Language thus became a test for race.


57. Thus Max Müller, recanting some of his earlier views, wrote in 1888 that “to me an ethnologist who speaks of an Aryan race, Aryan blood, Aryan eyes and hair, is as great a sinner as a linguist who speaks of a dolichocephal dictionary or a brachycephal grammar. It is worse than a Babylonian confusion of tongues—it is downright theft. We [linguists] have made our own terminology for the classification of languages; let ethnologists make their own for the classification of skulls, and hair, and blood” (Max Müller, Biographies of Words and the Home of the Aryan [London, 1888], pp. 120–21).

58. Thus many natural historians have hypothesized a human “monogenesis”—one genetic origin of all presently living human beings, sketching a family tree that illustrates a supposed divergence of humankind from a single DNA stock. The hypothesis of “Eve, mother of all humankind” in the logic of this natural history (Robert Wright, “Quest for the Mother Tongue,” Atlantic Monthly 267 [Apr. 1991]: 64; see also Philip E. Ross, “Hard Words,” Scientific American 264 [Apr. 1991]: 138–47, and compare Gen. 4:20—“The man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was mother of all living things”), like the apostle’s claim that “God made of one blood all the peoples of this earth” in the logic of Christian kinship (Acts 17:26; compare John 3:16) and in some versions of American abolitionist rhetoric, is both comfortably unitarian (“All men are my consanguineous kin”) and critically divisive (“Only my consanguineous kin are brothers, all others are animals”). Many historical linguists likewise hypothesize a single original source or locale for all human languages, some claiming to “have reconstructed the ancestor of all living languages” (Vitaly Shevoroshkin, “The Mother Tongue: How Linguists Have Reconstructed the Ancestor of All Living Languages,” The Sciences 30 [May/June 1990]: 20–28); this was, of course, the pre-Babel, Ur language that seventeenth-century theorists called Adamic, the “language” that modern linguists sometimes call Nostratic. See David S. Katz, Philo-Semitism and the Readmission of the Jews to England, 1603–1655 (Oxford, 1982), esp. chap. 2. Belief in the historical existence of this unitarian language is “a kind of religion” that “emphasize[s] the unity of humankind and the need of brotherhood” (Juha Janhunen, quoted in Wright, “Quest for the Mother Tongue,” p. 48). On the racialist rhetoric of German romantic linguistics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see also Martin Bernal, The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785–1985, vol. 1 of Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization (New Brunswick, N.J.,
sentiment remains that "language is by itself the nearest approach to a perfect test of national extraction." 59

How language mediates the politics of race or nationhood in North America depends on whether the state is essentially unilingual or multilingual. On the one hand, there are purportedly unilingual places where citizens generally have political rights (including that of "free speech") as individuals rather than as members of one or another particular linguistic or racial group. Thus every American universally has the same de facto right to go to school or to argue in court, but there is no constitutionally or officially guaranteed right in the United States to attend school or to plead in court in the language of one's choice, if one's choice is not English—perhaps, officially, even if one's choice is English. American courts do sometimes grant permission to plead in a non-English language, especially where there are many people who speak Spanish, but when differences between the meaning of the law as written in English and its meaning in the non-English translation appear, the courts make their disposition according to the "original" English.

On the other hand, there are such North American places as Québec. 60 Québec heeds the group rights of Canada's two constitutive nations (variously called English-speakers and French-speakers, or Protestants and Catholics, or British stock and French stock), generally subordinating the rights of these two official groups both to the individual rights of any particular citizen and to the group rights, if any, of linguistic, religious, and racial groups other than the official two. In this respect, Québec differs from the United States, which generally heeds the equal rights of individuals as members of one ideally unilingual nation, generally subordinating the status of citizens as members of particular linguistic groups, unless their group is the anglophone one. (Exceptionally or not, the United States does grant to some people, as members of groups, an anomalous treatment under the law. The fact that Hispanics are covered by various affirmative action rulings tends to lessen the difference in American ideology between race and language; the term Hispanic seems to indicate now a racial group, now a linguistic one.)

Official bilingualism in Québec has included the constitutive right of members of the two "originary" national groups, Protestants and Catholics, to attend schools in their respective religions. (There are no purely

---


60. For relevant details about the language issue in Québec, see Shell, Children of the Earth, esp. chap. 3, "The Road Not Taken in Québec," and "La Publicité bilingue au Québec: Une Langue fourchue," Journal canadien de recherche sémiotique 5, no. 2 (1977): 55–76.
"secular" schools of the American sort.)\textsuperscript{61} On the basis of this right, guaranteed by the British North America Act (1867), Protestant and Catholic leaders argued successfully that they had the derivative right to attend school in their respective language, Protestants being generally English-speaking and Catholics French-speaking.\textsuperscript{62} Further, they asserted the religious and linguistic rights of the groups of persons who are British "blood stock," or \textit{britannique de souche}, and who are French Canadian "blood stock," or \textit{québécois de souche}.

One way to understand the nationalist workings of such states as Québec is to ask, What happens to those "immigrants" to Québec who are, by racial or linguistic generation, neither French-speaking nor English-speaking, or neither "English" nor "French"?\textsuperscript{63} The answer tempers unrealistic enthusiasms for the Canadian cultural "mosaic" or "salad." In the United States, diverse immigrants all become American citizens by virtue of the civic ritual of naturalization (they are reborn or regenerated fictively as American: \textit{e pluribus unum}); in Québec all immigrants become members of one official group or the other. Official \textit{nationality} in Québec thus has a bi- or multilateral meaning.

In Québec in the 1980s, for example, immigrants from non-English-speaking countries (called allophones) and those from most English-speaking countries (anglophones) were classified, for educational and taxation purposes, as "French" (francophone). This meant that a person with Greek-speaking, Greek Orthodox parents was "francophone," and by the same legal \textit{fiction}, a monolingual English-speaking person from Singapore who was not \textit{britannique de souche} was classified as "francophone." By a similar fiction, Jews in Québec were generally classified as "English Protestants" (and so attended Protestant schools) even when they were, like the Morocco-born Sephardim, "native" French- or Arabic-speakers.\textsuperscript{64} The fact that the Jews of Montréal, whether European Ashke-

\textsuperscript{61} The Québec government’s Parent Act of 1964 introduced a few supposedly non-confessional (or secular) schools. Various governments since then have tried to secularize the entire school system.

\textsuperscript{62} In this same vein Martin Luther wrote in 1518 that "I thank God that I am able to hear and find my God in the German language, Whom neither I nor you could ever find in Latin or Greek or Hebrew” (quoted in Arno Borst, \textit{Der Turmbau von Babel: Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker}, 4 vols. in 6 [Stuttgart, 1957–63], 3:1:1066).


\textsuperscript{64} In previous decades some members of the Jewish community, including the "Bundists," had favored the assimilationist tendencies of this arrangement.
nazim or African Sephardim, both constituted something like one nation as a group (with one sacred written language) and spoke various native languages besides French or English as individuals, tended discomfortingly to challenge the thesis, dear to European linguistic nationalists, that a common spoken language is the main distinguishing characteristic of nationhood.

6. The Veil of Cultural Diversity

Out of an anxiety about cultural dependence on the English “mother tongue” and a romantic competition with English writers, anglophone American writers and literary critics have fabricated the idea of American as a primary—even independent—language and literature.65 (This American fabrication contrasts with the Canadian experience. The latter involves the dependence both of the English language and of the French language on their respective “mother countries,” Britain and France—a dependence fostered and abetted by the competition within Québec itself between English and French. That is why there is no Canadian national literature in the American sense of the term.)

Anglophone Americans’ various fictive idealizations of an independent American language buttressed the spectacular development in the United States of a distinctly monoglottal and linguistically amnesic national literature and culture. For neither in literature nor in American politics generally did the question of official language assert itself successfully. Among American French and American German writers the story is different, but despite the plethora of their books in America’s parish churches and great public and private libraries, their work is little studied by scholars in the institutionalized academic discipline called American language and civilization. In many American universities, professors of literature still say that nonanglophone American literature—American German, say, or American Chinese—belongs properly neither to departments of foreign languages nor to departments of English and American language and literature.

The American academy’s passing over most nonanglophone American languages and literatures is, of course, partly explicable by the fact that it is easier to talk about other peoples’ cultures in English than to learn other people’s talk. But the main explanation is that America, faltering always between its horror of race slavery and its ideal of race blindness, has always liked to emphasize racial difference instead of language difference. The contrast between emphasizing cultural diversity and deemphasizing language difference arises from the traditional American pretense that culture is not largely linguistic or, rather, that

65. See Walt Whitman, An American Primer, ed. Horace Traubel (Boston, 1904).
culture ought to be English.\textsuperscript{66} The monoglot Tereus fears the nightingale’s song.

Even as the American university claims to foster a tolerant heterogeneity of cultures, then, it perseveres in the traditional American homogenization of the world as English. At Hampshire College in Amherst, for example, one third of the curriculum is devoted to courses in “cultural diversity,” but there is not a single foreign language course. Such obliviousness to how Hispanic literature written in translation is still Anglo—the name Hispanics sometimes give to monoglot “white” anglophones—serves to obscure the fact of an ineradicable tension, crucial to understanding American ideology, between the argument that other languages should be assimilated to English and the argument that they really cannot be assimilated because, as Herder suggested, culture is (essentially) language. This is the tension informing thoughtful American writers in a tradition extending from Roger Williams’s \textit{Key into the Language of America} (1643) to Benjamin Whorf’s \textit{Language, Thought, and Reality} (1956), in which “standard average European” is compared with the language of the Hopi.\textsuperscript{67} (Much relevant anthropological, linguistic, and missionary investigation similarly concerns “culturally” non-European aspects of the languages of Amerindian tribes and thus often seems, like Whorf’s book itself, ventriloquistically to transform American silence about Amerindian genocide into something like the whisper of America.\textsuperscript{68})


\textsuperscript{67} Whorf’s teacher Edward Sapir had served as head of anthropology at the Canadian Museum (1910–25) before becoming professor of anthropology and linguistics at the University of Chicago (1925–31) and Yale (1931–39), where he met Whorf. Sapir, author of the influential \textit{Language} (New York, 1921), was German-born (in Pomerania, now Poland), as was Franz Boas, the influential scholar of British Columbia’s Amerindians. (Boas ultimately made his career as professor at Columbia from 1899.) Boas worked to refute eugenic theories of the time and to preserve details of cultures becoming extinct; his books include \textit{Handbook of American Indian Languages} (Washington, D.C., 1911) and \textit{Race, Language, and Culture} (New York, 1940).

\textsuperscript{68} See especially Jonathan Edwards, \textit{Observations on the Language of the Mohheganew Indians; in which the Extent of that Language in North-America is Shewn; its Genius is Grammatically Traced; some of its Peculiarities, and Some Instances of Analogy between that and the Hebrew are Pointed Out} (New Haven, Conn., 1788). For the many works written in the Amerindian languages themselves, see Robert Kruse, \textit{The Henry Rowe Schoolcraft Collection: A Catalogue of Books in Native American Languages in the Library of the Boston Athenaeum} (Boston, 1991). Being encouraged by economic or political circumstances—and sometimes being compelled by law—to speak a language other than one’s own, at least in the public sphere, is part of the experience of most nonanglophone immigrants. Some critics of this ambiguously involuntary an-
It is useful here to compare the academic fields of literary criticism in the United States and Québec. On the one hand, few American literary critics work on the vast multilingual literature of the United States. Most simply raise up English-language works written by Philomelan members of America’s various “ethnic” and “racial” groups—often in the name of multicultural diversity—even as they erase, or put down, American literary works written in languages other than English. Thus they encourage reading English-language literature by Americans of Chinese “ethnicity” but don’t bother with Chinese-language American literature.69

When scholars in the field of American studies, so called, do read nonanglophone American writings in the “original” language, they still generally exhibit distinctly monolingual methodological tendencies; they treat American German literature as a discretely non-American entity;70 for example, or they provide a five hundred-year history of an unrealistically remote Spanish literature of New Mexico,71 or they depict American Yiddish as a language basically disconnected from American English.72 (Not surprisingly, non-American students of American literature have often been better at this sort of work: European, Canadian, and Chinese scholars have made important contributions.)73

---

69. Sollos, Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture (Oxford, 1986) has barely a word to say about linguistic difference and official language, but see Ethnicity and Language, ed. Winston A. Van Horne (Milwaukee, 1987).


71. See several essays in Pasò por aquì: Critical Essays on the New Mexican Literary Tradition, 1542–1988, ed. Erlinda Gonzales-Berry (Albuquerque, N. Mex., 1989). As Heinz Kloss argues, “the entire life of New Mexico is colored by the coexistence of these two language groups,” that is, Spanish and English (Heinz Kloss, American Bilingual Tradition (Rowley, Mass., 1977), p. 126); however, it would be worth considering also the role of the unofficial languages, that is, the so-called native American languages, in a quasi-bilingual New Mexico as in an officially bilingual Québec.

72. Yiddish might provide a good case study, thanks in part to Henry James’s American Scene in which he writes concerning the possible effects of Yiddish on English that “the accent of the very ultimate future, in the States, may be destined to become the most beautiful on the globe . . . ; but whatever we shall know it for, certainly, we shall not know it for English—in any sense for which there is existing literary measure” (Henry James, The American Scene [1907; New York, 1946], p. 139). See also Cynthia Ozick, “Envy; or, Yiddish in America,” The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories (New York, 1971), pp. 99–100.

Tellingly, the American brand of comparative literature, so called, has been domesticated in such a way that, despite its multilingualism and its historical origin (at the beginning of the nineteenth century) in problems of linguistic and national difference, it generally avoids studying the linguistically multifaceted American literary experience and sometimes even serves to conceal that experience. The problem here is not so much that Americanized comparative literature has become a political rest home for professorial refugees and discards from linguistically unilingual literature departments (although, of course, in some cases it has). The problem is rather that professors project uncritically the linguistically homogenized domestic agenda of the United States onto the screens of faraway literary theories and national differentiations.

Among scholars in Québec, on the other hand, the emphasis is tellingly bifocal almost to the point of myopia. Here there is not only the traditional literary history of Québec’s various languages and literatures. There is also a fascination with diglossia (as in such works as Anne Hébert’s Kamouraska, a scholarly respect for j‘oual together with the old distrust of it, a rejuvenating interest in the theory of translating French texts that contain English words into English and translating English texts that contain French words into French (as in such works as Jacques Poulin’s Volkswagen Blues), much concern with the role of so-called transfuge writers, a still-growing movement to increase the number of French anthologies of English writers, and a renewing focus on publishing bilingual journals.


78. See the bilingual journals Vice Versa, Montréal Now, and Ellipse.
It would be tempting here to look outside the American academy to such popular American counterparts to these critical Québécois tendencies as the contemporary bilingual novel of the American Southwest and the multilingual—Spanish, English, and Haitian French—rap or hip-hop of Miami. But American popular culture has always been just beginning to comprehend its own multilingual elements. And American cultural criticism, in its inability or unwillingness to recognize America's centuries-long negotiations with such issues (or in its buoyant service to the national anglophone identity of the American literary tradition), still turns a blind eye to America's past—and its future.

7. A Conclusion

What the United States evidences nowadays is both a continual rise in the number of non-English speakers and a unilingual policy without overt official sanction. Any social or intellectual movement towards official bilingualism—legally mandated bilingualism in court, say, with equally weighted versions of the law—would have little positive means of expression in current culture. (It does have a negative means, however, as when the self-styled “Japanese-American” former senator S. I. Hayakawa, in a legal tradition dating back to 1923, introduced a bill to make English the one and only official language of the country.)

79. See Cormac McCarthy’s novel All the Pretty Horses (New York, 1992), one part of The Border Trilogy. Set in Texas and Mexico, this book includes a good deal of Spanish.


81. In the 1980s, the total number of United States residents five years old and over who spoke a language other than English at home rose by 14 percent to 31,845,000 in 1990. The number of people who speak Spanish and French—the two most frequently spoken non-English languages—rose by 50.1 percent to 17,339,000 and by 8.3 percent to 1,703,000 respectively. (The figure for French speakers includes French Canadians in New Hampshire and Maine, but it does not include Haitian Creole-speakers, whose number rose by 65.4 percent to 188,000, or Louisiana Cajun-speakers.) It is not only the rate of immigration (50.1 percent) that explains the high number of Spanish speakers. (Some immigrant groups have higher rates of immigration: Chinese up 97.7 percent to 1,249,000, Tagalog up 88.6 percent to 843,000, Korean up 127.2 percent to 626,000, and Vietnamese up 149.5 percent to 507,000.) It is also the feeling that Spanish has a certain staying power deriving, on the one hand, from the feeling in some parts of the country—principally such border states as New Mexico and California, with 33.5 percent and 31.5 percent non-English speakers—that enough people already speak Spanish to make the language “self-sustaining” and, on the other hand, from the belief that Spanish speakers have a historical “right” to the land. A similar belief may help account for the rise in the number of French speakers and of Navaho speakers (up 20.6 percent to 149,000).

82. Hayakawa, a former senator from California, proposed the constitutional amendment that would have made English the official language of the United States. See Jon Stewart, “Saving America from Foreign Tongues,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 31 May 1981, p. B2. For a discussion of this amendment, see Hayakawa, One Nation—Indivisible? The twentieth-century legal movement to make “American” the official language of the United
legislative bills with doublespeak misnomers like Bilingual Education Act—bills that turn out to mean something like “help for the linguistically disabled”—divert public attention from official language as much as does talk about quirksily “regional” literary traditions. And, for many Americans, caught up in problems of civil warring and an almost official biracialism, the example of an always apparently dividing, officially bilingual Canada looms as a warning against any experiments in bilingualism. (Thus Edward A. Steiner wrote in 1916 that “a cleavage in the language [of the United States] now would mean to us a cleavage of the nation in its most vulnerable if not in its most essential part.”) So it is that a country once polyglot, with thousands of bilingual schools, has become unilingual, barely, in the twentieth century.

More startling than American lack of intellectual concern with official bilingualism is the lack of political interest in the problems and opportunities of actual multilingualism. After all, America’s longstanding attempts to decentralize political power by “balancing” one power against another would seem almost to make official bilingualism palatable. (Such bilingualism would mean that the Spanish version of the Constitution would have equal “weight” with the English version; translation would thus partly replace interpretation of the English words of the document’s authors.) There are controversies about language in the workplace that would seem to goad America to consider the legal issue, as when commercial corporations seek to outlaw the use of Asian languages or Spanish in

---


85. This is the regular condition, we say, of “developing” nations. See Language Problems of Developing Nations, ed. Fishman, Charles A. Ferguson, and Jyotirindra Das Gupta (New York, 1968).
the lunch room. Also there are disagreements about the appropriate language for private or public signs, as when anglophones want to outlaw unilingual non-English signs in California. In this latter case, the court certified the right to have unilingual non-English signs, but it is significant that the court made its ruling not on the basis of any argument about official (or unofficial) language but only on one about First Amendment rights—free speech. Thus America’s generally laudable concern with free speech served, as usual, to distract Americans from the issue of official language and even to veil it. (It is the apparent contrast in North America between the rights of individuals [American free speech] and the rights of groups [American race rights, Canadian language rights] that sheds light on why the free speech arena is not the politically realistic place to stage effectively an American debate about official languages and multilingualism.)

It might seem easier nowadays to raise the issue of constitutional bilingualism thanks to contemporary discussions of American statehood for Puerto Rico or to current debates about North American union for Canada, the United States, and Mexico. Concerning Puerto Rico, for example, its altercations about whether to “elevate” English to the status of official language has again made many terms of the language debate quasi-official. In January of this year “Governor Pedro Rosselló [of Puerto Rico] signed into law a bill that [gave] English equal status with Spanish as the official language of this American territory. ‘Now we have two hymns, two flags, two languages,’ Mr. Rosselló, a statehood advocate, declared to hundreds of cheering supporters at a signing ceremony. . . . He dismissed as ‘a rhetorical storm’ the arguments of critics who had sought to safeguard Spanish’s 21-month-old status as the island’s sole official language.” To an unofficially unilingual American populace, still undecided even whether the term Hispanic refers to a linguistic or a racial grouping, official Spanish/English bilingualism in Washington, D.C., still means only “a rhetorical storm”—and babble in education, law, and the


87. In 1988 the city of Pomona enacted an ordinance providing that if local businesses “displayed signs featuring ‘foreign alphabetical characters,’ they must ‘devote at least one-half of the sign area to advertising copy in English alphabetical characters.’” (Crawford, introduction to Asian American Business Group v. City of Pomona, in Language Loyalties, pp. 284–85). See also Bilingualism in the Southwest, ed. Paul R. Turner (Tucson, Ariz., 1973) and “Indian Language Renewal,” in Human Organization 47 (Winter 1988): 283–329. Law cases include discrimination in the workplace against not only those who speak a non-English language but also those who speak English dialects and those who speak English with a foreign accent.

workplace. (It is useful to rephrase the question of Spanish/English bilingualism with the crucible-metaphor that has informed discussion of ethnicity since even before Israel Zangwill’s *Melting-Pot* [1908] and Theodore Roosevelt’s “Children of the Crucible” [1917]. In these perhaps too-familiar terms, the main question is not how long the Spanish language can resist melting in the anglophone pot of America. Nor is the question whether Spanish will “break the [linguistic] melting pot” in the sense that Webster meant when he surveyed the linguistic diversity of the United States in the late eighteenth century and predicted that all the American languages—English, German, French, and so on—would eventually melt together to become a distinctly nonanglophone language.\(^89\) Rather, the main question involving bilingualism would concern whether the Spanish language will become, in the United States, another linguistic melting pot, just as the English language has already become a second official linguistic pot in Puerto Rico. As such the Spanish language in the United States would become not just the language of a “nation within a nation”—which is what Martin Delany called American blacks\(^90\) and Clermont-Tonnerre called French Jews—\(^91\) but a twin language alongside English, whether as an officially unofficial language, which is what English is in the present, or, more fractious toward the ideology of one melting pot, as an official language, which is what the English language itself would also be likely to become in such circumstances.)

Similarly, it might appear simpler these days to raise issues of official multilingualism thanks to contemporary American hopes for—or fears of—a North American economic union (NAFTA) joining together the United States, Mexico, and Canada. This union, should it ever amount to more than “free trade,” would seem to project and fulfill Americans’ dream of manifest destiny north and south, Mexicans’ vision of again crossing legally the Rio Grande, and francophone Canadians’ traditional conviction that they would have been better off with anglophone Americans than with anglophone Canadians. In the first years, moreover, such a union might well weaken federal governments and simultaneously strengthen local cultures (hence languages), much as the contemporary political unification of multilingual Europe seems to be doing. But the problems and opportunities for this North American future are properly accessible to debate only in a discourse to which Americans still show the specific “nationalizing” resistance that was, for centuries, part of America’s unifying motive.

Thus the story of America's social language-engineering is there to be understood and perhaps wisely redirected. It is a remarkable, and some would say heroic, story of immigration: forced, illegal, and voluntary; of treaties, purchases, and constitutions by which Spanish-, French-, German-, and Amerindian-speakers' languages, among many others, were subsumed; of a once new and powerfully nationalist literary movement that still informs devotedly monoglotlal American university departments. Most Americans, however, cannot yet tell the story, or they do not want to tell the real story, not so much because the languages are forgotten (which they are), but mainly because forgetting language difference—and hence, more critically, partly suppressing the category of "language" itself—is still the urgent component of unofficially anglophone America's understanding of itself. America's otherwise laudable concerns with free speech, dialect, bilingual education, ethnicity, and cultural diversity serve effectively to mask substantive language issues. Comprehending the full magnitude of multilingualism in the United States—and defining the problem of the language rights of "peoples" both within it and without it—thus probably requires a radical revision of the political history of languages in North America. "Babel in America" is, I hope, an introductory essay in that direction.

If ever we work our way beyond discussing free speech to seriously debating official national language—and there is no sign yet that we will and no clear imperative that we should—the change will involve linguistic history and law. On an ideal plane, perhaps, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the original constitution of New Mexico will play roles. But practically speaking, the change would probably concern Puerto Rico. For Puerto Ricans, the question of statehood entails establishing officially bilingual government at the federal as well as the state levels. And so, for good or ill, Spanish-speaking Puerto Ricans may yet have the official status for which German-speaking Pennsylvanians once struggled and that both French-speaking Québécois and English-speaking Quebeckers have, for now.

Monoglotlal anglophone Americans often say they believe in the equality of all language groups, when they mean only the equality of language groups other than the definitively, if not officially, anglophone one. Yet American Spanish-speakers, among others we have considered, may have a winning legal or demographic case for language equality with anglophones—hence for the same inequality with speakers of other languages that English speakers have. Time has told already what implications this long-primed scenario will have for defining anew the American language and America.