Uncle Sam and Mr Unz

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Language needs, politics, and pressures in the United States



[A mildly adapted version of an article of the same name which appeared in *Australian Language Matters* 2002, No. 4.]

IN THE United States today, two developments – concern for national security and the concerns of private citizens – have catapulted languages onto the national policy agenda. The first requires more Americans to learn foreign languages while the second seeks to ban bilingual education. 'Uncle Sam wants you to learn a foreign language!' The stern look under the high hat with its row of stars, wispy white beard and hair, and the index finger pointing right at you: this is the American call to duty. But this time, on page 135 of the *Major League Baseball Official Program* (Fall Classic, Oct 02), Uncle Sam didn't want Americans to join the military. The text the image said why: 'The events of September 11th have brought national attention to America's lack of language readiness as a threat to our well being', then referred fans to <www.learnlanguage.org>, a campaign organised by the National Foreign Language Center, whose website asks visitors to: 'Get Involved. Support your country. Learn another language'. But matters are not as simple as that.

The Sputnik effect

Uncle Sam is a classic of American iconography. The name stands for US and the image personifies the Federal government. Classically, Uncle Sam recruits for military service, a role he has performed since his earliest forerunner on supply containers during the War of 1812. Promoted in political cartoons from the 1830s as embodying the US government, the various representations of Uncle Sam were progressively codified, until 1961 when Congress adopted the present representation as an official national symbol.

Uncle Sam's awareness of languages in late 2002 revives an older association of languages with national security. The most dramatic instance was Sputnik: the collective name of ten Union of Soviet Socialist Republics satellites launched into space between 1957 and 1961. Sputnik heralded a new era of science and exploration, but also provoked intense rivalry between the Capitalist and Communist blocs during the Cold War. Although Sputnik had mainstream science goals (such as studying the earth's upper atmosphere), it also aimed to test Soviet rocketry.

Sputnik 1, launched on October 4, 1957, was unmanned, while Sputnik 2, launched November 3, 1957, famously carried Laika, the world's first space dog, who perished once the tiny capsule that hurled her beyond the earth's atmosphere exhausted its oxygen supply. More space dogs paved the way for the ultimate goal of launching humans beyond earth's atmosphere. This happened on April 12, 1961, when, under a new series of satellites, Vostok I carried the first human to visit space, cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin.

The Sputnik and Vostok missions had a dramatic impact on US policy makers, who identified alarming implications beyond shared goals of science and space exploration. The military implications came from the use of intercontinental ballistic missiles as the launch technology. Some of these missiles were capable of reaching American targets in less than an hour, much faster than conventional bomber aircraft. Provoked into reaction, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the National Aeronautics and Space Act of 1958, creating

DOI: 10.1017/S0266078404003037

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078404003037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

NASA and transferring earth-based political tensions into space. The result was the Space Race of the 1960s that culminated in Apollo 11's successful Lunar Landing Mission on July 16, 1969.

In addition to stimulating increased investment in science, space exploration, and weapons research, Sputnik had dramatic educational consequences as the US linked foreign languages with a growing concern about its national security. Two key moves here were the National Defense Act of 1958 and the Fullbright Hays Act of 1961, both of which treated language competence (along with 'area studies') as a strategic national capability.

It would be misleading to suggest that national security was the only motivation for language policy in the US at this time. Throughout the 1960s there was also extensive civil rights-oriented language planning, which built on both the principles of the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s-early 1960s and the resulting Civil Rights Act of 1964. Drawing on civil rights principles, The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 legislated 'remedial native language instruction'. This civil-rights ethos in language planning was also behind the 1975 amendments to the Voting Rights Act, that provided bilingual ballots and bilingual voting materials, the requirement for the use of interpreters in courts in the Court Interpreters Act of 1978, as well as the Native American Languages Act of 1990, among others, that have applied and extended this progressive impulse in language planning.

Through these dramas of bitter competition for scientific and technological superiority, the words *sputnik* and *sputnik effect* have come to stand for a political rival's perceived challenge to the security or prosperity of the United States. Today, forty-five years after the launch of the tiny satellite, sputnik effects are evident in the enduring connection between languages and national security. We see this in the large commitment to bilingualism within many agencies and departments of the US government. Brecht and Rivers (2000 xi; 2002) report that some 80 federal agencies – 'from the State Department to the Patent and Trademark Office' – depend in part on proficiency in more than 100 foreign languages, up from the 19 agencies that had designated 'language essential positions' in 1985. Between these two dates another analysis showed that '33 Federal agencies have over 34,000 positions which require foreign language proficiency' (Lay 1995:1). From 1985 through 1995 to 2001, the number of federal agencies that designate foreign-language competence as essential, the number of jobs so designated, and the number of languages involved, have all seen steady increases.

After September 11, however, US needs for strategic bilingualism have again been under scrutiny, in a way that is reminiscent of Sputnik, especially in the sense of urgency combined with alarm that the 1957 Soviet science-and-technology superiority provoked. The difference is not that a political rival has stolen a march over the US in science or technology, but that non-state terrorism has hit American cities. Since September 11, Congress has charged various committees to review the contribution that deficiencies in key language skills may have played in exposing American civil aircraft, buildings, airports and other civilian infrastructure to attack. And a coalition of

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078404003037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

national language agencies has launched the *Learn Language* publicity campaign that features Uncle Sam's recruiting.

Some language advocates express concern, opposition or distaste, to associating languages closely with a discourse of national security, intelligence gathering and military planning. Others accept it as inevitable, but express disappointment that such crisis-response language planning is ultimately ineffective, arguing that serious language education programs require long-term development and support, not short-term fixes. Reflecting this latter view is former Senator, and long time language advocate, Paul Simon, who has argued:

> In every national crisis from the Cold War through Vietnam, Desert Storm, Bosnia and Kosovo, our nation has lamented its foreign language shortfalls. But then the crisis 'goes away,' and we return to business as usual. One of the messages of September 11 is that business as usual is no longer an acceptable option.
>
> – *Washington Post*, October 2001

Alongside this call to 'make it different this time' is the priority ranking given to languages by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. Deliberating on the Intelligence Authorization Act of 2002, the Committee ranks foreign language needs above other kinds of expertise shortfalls:

> There continues to be a great need throughout the Intelligence Community for increased expertise in a number of intelligence-related disciplines and specialties. However, the Committee believes the most pressing such need is for greater numbers of foreign language-capable intelligence personnel, with increased fluency in specific and multiple languages.
>
> – US House of Representatives (2002:18)

Given the relatively low-proficiency outcomes from many existing higher-education programs, the small-time commitment normally devoted to language study, the demands of the technical and 'area study' specialisations, and the huge academic load implied by the term 'multiple languages' one might describe this, in Australian, as a 'big ask!'

What is undeniable is the immense increase in spending on foreign languages in higher education since September 11, largely sourced from the National Security Education Program (created in 1991 to support language study abroad aimed at raising proficiency attainments). Among many new measures is the National Flagship Language Initiative which supports higher education institutions in recruiting learners who already have conversational proficiency in languages deemed critical for national security, and bringing them to advanced proficiency (aiming for at least Superior 3 on the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages Scale). The National Flagship Language Initiative underscores that the perceived need is not only with how many Americans study foreign languages, nor with which languages they study, but, crucially, with the levels of proficiency they achieve.

This is a major challenge in language-planning terms. The needed proficiency levels are so high that few monolingual beginners can be expected to reach them, and exceptionally gifted new learners prepared to devote a career to becoming bilingual are rare. As a result, many American language-planning experts believe that Uncle Sam will have to stop focusing on baseball fans and point his recruiting finger towards speakers of America's 'heritage languages'. The US is one of the world's most linguistically and ethnically diverse nations and among its 255 million population there are many speakers of virtually every strategically important language. But every year, the majority fail to develop their unschooled competence in Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish or Vietnamese, as narrow assimilationism makes bilingualism a social negative.

As if to emphasise the contradiction between high level national planning for foreign languages and wastage of community-level language resources, on January 8, 2002 the Bush administration abolished the 1968 Bilingual Education Act (BEA). This Federal mandate for bilingual education actually represented a potential basis for a wide-reaching and comprehensive national language-education law that aimed to maintain minority children's languages rather than discarding them. But after years of often-virulent opposition, the BEA was mortally wounded by its narrow associations with effecting rapid transfer to English. It was abolished in the context of a wider reform law known as the *No Child Left Behind* Act. Democrats joined Republicans in supporting its abolition.

No Child Left Behind is big on 'accountability' and high-stakes testing. It assesses schools against criteria such as the percentage of English-language learners who are each year 'reclassified' as fluent in English. Obligatory

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078404003037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

annual English assessments, bolstered by punitive measures for schools and districts that fail to 'show' academic progress in English, reinforce more overt provisions in *No Child Left Behind* against the use of minority languages in teaching. The very word *bilingual* (even if in reality it often meant English) has been removed from the law. *No Child Left Behind* increases grants to states to a whopping $650 million per annum for an estimated 4.4 million eligible English learners, but the languages they speak are not to be heard. Enter Ron Unz.

Bilingualism and Mr Unz

While Uncle Sam is pointing the finger at baseball enthusiasts and associating bilingualism with patriotic duty, Ron Unz has taken to bilingual education with a big bat. He burst onto the US bilingual-education scene in 1998 and changed that world forever. A Silicon Valley multi-millionaire software developer turned English-only education campaigner, he revitalised the longstanding but recently faltering Official English movement. The public face of his language-instruction political platform is styled 'English for the Children' and its modus operandi is a professional, well-funded, and successful rolling campaign of state-by-state citizen ballots. Using the mechanism of voter-signature collections, English for the Children has managed to place ballots for banning bilingual education before the electorates of California in 1998, Arizona in 2000, and Colorado and Massachusetts in 2002.

In this context, the term *bilingual education* refers to a transitional method common in American schools, funded or stimulated by Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Bilingual Education Act of 1968. This method involves the temporary use of the 'native language' of 'limited English proficient' children, for continuing their general learning while they acquire English, then 'exiting' them from the bilingual stream into English-only classes. Transitional bilingual education does not aim to achieve bilingualism, but to teach English more effectively. The controversy derives from claims by opponents that children spend 'too long' in the native language and that English is better taught through greater direct exposure to English via ESL; although in fact most opposition seems to have little to do with educational issues at all. The majority of reliable evidence indicates that bilingual education is an effective method for teaching English while helping learners not to fall behind their age peers in general learning and conceptual development (cf. J.Crawford, *Bilingual Education:History, Politics, Theory and Practice,* 4th edition, 1999, Bilingual Educational Services: Los Angeles and Cummins, J *Language, Power and Pedagogy,* 2000*,* Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters).

English for the Children leaves aside the hardy-perennial biases in movements which usually accuse bilingual teaching of four things: (1) undermining national unity; (2) balkanising American society; (3) denigrating English; (4) damaging social cohesion by locating itself within a wider school-reform ideology, in the process misrepresenting bilingual education as lowering education standards.

With his first attempt, Unz achieved a huge success when, on June 2, 1998, Californians voted 61% to 39% to approve Proposition 227, an English-only instruction to the State Legislature. Success turned to disappointment, however, when many schools continued to teach bilingually. This was possible under clauses in Proposition 227 that allowed schools to gain exemptions, called waivers, if a sufficient number of parents requested them. Forming partnerships, parents and school administrators across California used the waiver system in such a way that about 170,000 eligible children have been able to continue their education in bilingual classrooms, thereby thwarting the strictest interpretation of Proposition 227.

In its next move, English for the Children turned its sights on Arizona, placing Proposition 203 on the ballot. To prevent leakage back into bilingual education via what English for the Children called 'abuses', Proposition 203 contained tighter restrictions on waivers. On November 7, 2000, Arizona followed California's lead and adopted its own English-only education law. Effectively Proposition 203 prohibits teaching in any language other than English, and, on at least one interpretation, may even ban programs for teaching foreign languages and reviving Native American languages. Instead, children with 'limited English proficiency' are offered an alternative called 'structured English immersion' whose duration is 'not normally intended' to last longer than 12 months. In addition, Proposition 203 is considerably tighter than California's Proposition 227 in restricting the *kinds* of exemptions that are

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078404003037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

permitted: for example, children under the age of ten can only gain waivers if they suffer certain kinds of physical or psychological disabilities. In addition, Proposition 203:

- imposes stringent conditions under which 'English learners' are to be 'reassigned' to mainstream English medium classes from bilingual education
- mandates achievement tests for all Arizona students regardless of their level of English
- contains a range of legal-action rights for parents, school districts, and others 'aggrieved' by bilingual education practices

In what seems an anti-democratic and extreme measure, Proposition 203 also places major barriers against reforms to its own provisions, even by the State Legislature.

Arizona's linguistic diversity includes 21 Native American languages, such as Apache, Hualapai and Navajo (many of which are threatened with extinction as children grow up speaking only English) and a range of immigrant languages. About a third of the state's ESL pupils were in bilingual-education programs at the time of the adoption of Proposition 203, mostly under local arrangements, unlike the state law provisions of California. Exactly what effects the tightened waiver provisions will have on bilingual education remains to be seen, as there is a minefield of litigation and local-application politics facing Arizona educators who now have to steer a narrow path between the formal law provisions of Proposition 203, its narrow exemptions clauses, various interpretations that are being contested in the courts, and the educational needs of its English learners. And this says nothing of the languages they actually speak.

Emboldened by this success, English for the Children in November 2002 targeted conservative Colorado with Amendment 31 and liberal Massachusetts with Question 2. In some respects, even tougher provisions were applied to these two ballot initiatives than in Arizona. For example, the Colorado initiative aimed to:

- make 'any school district employee' (which means teachers, school board members, school administrators and possibly public officials) subject to litigation for violations of the law
- require parents committed to bilingual instruction for their children to obtain formal waivers 'each and every school year', but makes these available only after students have spent 30 'instructional days' in English-only classrooms
- order schools to 'report as zero' student achievement scores if those students do not sit required English-language achievement tests (only children 'classified as severely learning disabled' would be exempted from this requirement)
- and prohibit 'bilingual instruction' in the Constitution of Colorado, which would have the effect of making it impossible for the state to repeal or amend the English-only mandate.

In the litigious environment of contemporary American education it is salutary to consider the likely effects on relations between educators and parents engendered by such provisions, as well as the tenor of the law, as set out in the following extract from Amendment 31:

> ... all Colorado school children have the right to be provided at their local school with an English language public education. The parent or legal guardian of any Colorado school child shall have legal standing to sue for enforcement of the provisions of this statute, and if successful shall be awarded normal and customary attorney's fees and actual and compensatory damages, but not punitive or consequential damages. Any school district employee, school board member or other elected official or administrator who willfully and repeatedly refuses to implement the terms of this statute may be held personally liable for fees and actual and compensatory damages by the child's parents or legal guardian, and cannot be subsequently indemnified for such assessed damages by any public or private third party. Any individual found so liable shall be immediately removed from office, and shall be barred from holding any position of authority anywhere within the Colorado government or the public school system for an additional period of five years. Parents who apply for and are granted exception waivers under Subsection (4)(B)3 above still retain full and permanent legal right to sue the individuals who granted such waivers if they subsequently conclude at any point in the future that the waivers were granted in error and ultimately injured the education of their child.

The votes took place in conjunction with the mid-term Congressional elections across America. In liberal Massachusetts voters were persuaded, and banned bilingual education, while in conservative Colorado Amendment 31 was defeated. Given the reaction of English for the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078404003037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Children it may however only be a reprieve. According to James Crawford, a long-time analyst of the anti-bilingual education movement (cf. <http://lists.asu.edu>), powerful TV ads may have been decisive in defeating Amendment 31, but perhaps not in elevating the goals of bilingual education. Crawford considers that, by September 2002, the commissioned public relations consultants who researched community feeling prior to devising the campaign against the Amendment hit on a 'winning idea'. They interviewed an archetypal suburban voter: 'female, Republican, parent, strong supporter of 31'. When informed that her own children's education might be disrupted if 'limited English proficient' children were transferred out of bilingual into mainstream classes, this voter exclaimed: 'They're going to put them in my kid's class?' This reaction was decisive in shaping the slogan *Chaos in the Classroom!* That, according to Crawford, played a decisive role in defeating Amendment 31. Whilst he welcomes the defeat of a proposal which he strongly opposed, Crawford calls it 'winning ugly' and 'pandering to white racial fears'.

The Colorado campaign also benefited from a reverse image of Ron Unz's own personalised bankrolling of the politics of language. The anonymous parent of a child enrolled in an immersion bilingual program was so incensed because that child would be made illegal along with transitional programs that she donated $3 million to defending bilingual education. So, Amendment 31 was defeated, at least partly, by appeals on television and radio and in the press that exploited mainstream parents' anxiety about 'limited English proficient' children disrupting their own children's regular education.

This perverse fate for bilingual education, defended by promoting segregationist thinking among the majority community, has major consequences for how campaigns of the future will be conducted as English for the Children targets new states, or perhaps returns to Colorado to try again. It also marks the chasm between the prominence the highest organs of state attribute to bilingual proficiency and the messages the wider society gives out about the languages new Americans use every day.

Before *English for the Children* arrived on the scene, language politics was dominated by US English, a large Washington DC based organization committed to laws declaring English the official language of the US ('English-only laws'). Despite a tough measure in Utah in 2000 that restricts public services in other languages and being able in 2002 to claim Iowa as the 24th Official English state, the English-only campaign was on the wane. Proponents were running out of states willing to enact tough legislation, the majority of states adopting weak symbolic declarations, while politicians became reluctant to alienate an emerging political consciousness among Latinos. But Unz has revitalised the fortunes of the disparate English-only movement, just as September 11 has mobilised Uncle Sam to revitalise the fortunes of foreign languages. Unz shares the legacy of hostility to multilingualism and multiculturalism that animates the official English movement in general, but has taught them a lesson in how to move from weak symbolism to legal prohibition.

Conclusion: Two kinds of bilingualism

What are we to make of all this? Uncle Sam wants Americans to learn foreign languages while Ron Unz closes down bilingual education. The Federal government abolishes the Bilingual Education Act but invests huge sums in foreign-language teaching because American lives are endangered if too few are competent in foreign languages. The 2000 General Social Survey found that between 60-70% of Americans want to ban bilingual education and pass laws to declare English the official language, while all the while lamenting Americans' lack of proficiency with foreign languages (Brecht & Rivers 2001). Complicating things still further are studies conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics that document both success and popularity for two-way immersion bilingual education (Christian, Montone, Lindholm, & Carranza 1997) in which usually middle-class children learn in and through a foreign language.

It will not be linguistics or language-teaching methodology, nor law, security planning, or international relations that we need to look to for clues to understand such strange phenomena. The answers lie in the social context of bilingualism. The Bilingual Education Act was concerned for the educational prospects of poor children who speak languages other than English. Governments, everywhere, educate the poor badly, especially when the poor are

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078404003037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

also culturally different. The BEA started its 34 years of life essentially as an anti-poverty law, for a poverty that comes in the form of small immigrant children speaking languages different from school English. During its turbulent life, the BEA was not transformed into a policy for reconstituting children's home languages as a positive intellectual, cultural and social tool. That discourse is now taken up in a separate Heritage Languages movement that, in September 2002, held its second national conference at Tyson's Corner, Virginia.

But that is a community- and educator-based movement. Agitating for language policy justified on a basis of national security are powerful forces in the military, government, and industry. And agitating against bilingual education are monied entrepreneurs. Not a level paying field. All of which makes Uncle Sam's job more complicated than merely boosting numbers in higher education language courses. The national security interest depends on very high levels of language skill and Uncle Sam needs the trust of minority communities in whose homes the critical languages of national strategic calculations are the daily means of communication.

Two kinds of American bilingualism – radically different social entities – stand behind the prospects for success and failure in all these endeavours. The bilingualism of immigrants and poor people is often construed as a major social problem threatening national cohesion and endangering security. Cashed-up and professionally organised public campaigns for its restriction result in the intrusion of law and sanction into classrooms, and set teachers and parents at loggerheads, ultimately leading all the way to legal prohibition. For elites, however, the name and the kind of bilingualism they are fostering is an altogether different entity. It is a skill, an esteemed cultural accomplishment, an investment in national capability, and a resource advancing national security and enhancing employment.

If Uncle Sam fails to win sufficient recruits, and if those that do sign up don't achieve usable skills, then Mr Unz may be partly to blame. ■

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078404003037 Published online by Cambridge University Press