Racialization and language policy: The case of the U. S. A.

RONALD SCHMIDT, SR.

Abstract

Employing critical discourse analysis, this paper interrogates the question of whether it is racist to pursue an English-only language policy in the contemporary ideological context of the United States. This question has generated heated controversy in the United States for over two decades. Proponents of bilingualism or linguistic pluralism often charge that English-only advocates are motivated by racial animosity and that their English-only program is aimed at keeping racialized minorities subordinated and excluded from the country's civil society and public domains. Official English advocates are adamant in their denunciations of these charges, claiming that their program of linguistic assimilation is inclusive and egalitarian, while it is the false goal of 'bilingualism' that is responsible for maintaining ethno-linguistic social stratification in the United States. The paper goes beyond the contentious question of the subjective motivations behind language policy proposals to examine the discursive social context in which language policy might be systematically linked to societal processes of racialization through ideology. The analysis points toward the conclusion that a policy of bilingualism has distinct advantages over a policy of English-only in trying to undermine U. S. racialization processes through language policy.

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One of the most contentious issues in the recent U. S. culture wars involves the charge of racism leveled against efforts to establish an English-only language policy. Reverberating through controversies over bilingual education, linguistic access to political and civil rights, and over campaigns to make English the sole official language, this accusation has provoked unusually heated denials and denunciations by English-only advocates. In the context of this heated debate, this paper addresses the
question whether an English-only language policy in the United States can be described accurately as racist. It asks this question through a discourse analysis of the ideological context in which U.S. language policy conflict has been acted out in recent years. The paper argues that a conjunction of the hegemonic position of the dominant English language and the socially constructed normalization of whiteness creates an ideological context within which Americans speaking languages other than English, and whose origins lie in continents other than Europe, are racialized as alien outsiders, as Others. The paper further argues that policies promoting English-only are best understood as maintaining and promoting that racializing ideological context.

U.S. language policy conflict

Though they wax and wane, and are more salient in some regions of the country than in others, political conflicts over language policy are a significant part of the contemporary U.S. conflict widely known as the culture wars. In June 1998, for example, California voters overwhelmingly approved a ballot initiative, Proposition 227, aiming to eliminate most bilingual education programs from the state’s public schools. In the November 2000 election, Arizona voters passed a virtually identical ballot initiative. Encouraged by these showings of strong public support, Ron Unz, the primary sponsor of both measures, carried his campaign to eliminate bilingual education to numerous other states in the U.S., and worked to help New York City’s former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s unsuccessful efforts to end that city’s bilingual education programs.

Similar efforts have been made at the national level of government. During the heat of the 1996 Presidential election campaign, for example, in a nearly straight party-line vote the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill that would have declared English the sole official language of the United States, and would have eliminated the language minority provisions of the Voting Rights Act (specifically, those provisions requiring ballots and election materials in languages other than English in jurisdictions with concentrations of language minorities). The Senate did not act on the bill, but Republican Presidential candidate Robert Dole strongly endorsed it, while Democratic candidate President Bill Clinton announced his intention to veto the bill if passed by both houses of Congress. Despite his avowed respect for the Latino culture, moreover, George W. Bush’s ascendancy to the U.S. Presidency leaves the fate of Federal support for bilingual education and Voting Rights Act language provisions in serious doubt, inasmuch as there are strong pressures from within the Republican Party Congressional leadership for their elimination.
These examples of recent political actions on language-related issues are illustrative of the three primary policy issues in U.S. language politics over the last three decades: bilingual education for language minority children, linguistic access to civil and political rights such as voting, and the campaign to make English the sole official language of the United States. In each of these policy issue areas the same protagonists have been pitted in consistent opposition to each other. Assimilationists are those who oppose bilingual education, linguistic access to voting and other civil and political rights, and who favor making English the sole official language of the United States and its state and local governments. Pluralists take the opposite stance on each of these issues, favoring bilingual education, non-English ballots for language minorities and other linguistic access rights, and opposing official English policies.

The most prominent rhetorical themes in the debates over these language policy issues have been those of the justice issue of equality for U.S. language minorities and the common good issue of national unity. Typically pluralists have been especially motivated by the theme of justice, arguing that equality for language minorities requires bilingualism in education, elections, the workplace, and other public spaces in government and civil society. Assimilationists dispute this argument, claiming that language minorities will attain greater equality only when they are helped to shift to the English language and thereby are mainstreamed into U.S. society. Assimilationists are most exercised, however, by their belief that governmental support for bilingualism is divisive, leading to the balkanization of American society, and is therefore harmful to national unity. Pluralists respond that it is the campaign to displace languages other than English that is causing the division, not policies aimed at helping to include language minorities.  

As noted above, one of the most emotionally charged rhetorical themes within this on-going debate is that of racism. From the beginning of the reemergence of language policy conflict in the United States in the late 1960s, some pluralists have accused assimilationists of engaging in a racist political campaign. More specifically, they have argued that the campaigns for official English policy are often motivated by racial animosity, and that efforts to eliminate both bilingual education and linguistic access to voting materials are aimed at maintaining racialized inequality in U.S. society. Proponents of assimilationist language policies respond to these charges with heated denials, pointing to the obviously inclusive impact of linguistic assimilation to English. It is the pluralists, assimilationists insist, who want to maintain a segregated society in which members of language minorities are kept marginalized by their ethnocentric leaders.
Describing and analyzing the debate over this issue in some detail may help to illuminate the problematic relationship between racialized identity and cultural practices such as language. The argument of the paper is that the two concepts converge in the *politics of identity*, and that understanding their relationship in that way helps to clarify what is at stake in contemporary language policy conflict, as well as in other fronts of the culture wars.

**The assimilationist argument: English language assimilation as inclusive and egalitarian**

I will begin by outlining the case made by linguistic assimilationists that – at least in the United States – assimilation is *more* inclusive and egalitarian than any alternative language policy approach, and is quite the opposite of a racializing program. As noted above, the social and political problem that seems to be most pressing on the minds of assimilationists is the problem of *national unity*. Much of the emotional energy behind the movement to oppose bilingual education and so-called bilingual ballots, and in favor of an official English language policy, for example, stems from fears that linguistic pluralism will drive the nation toward ethnolinguistic conflict. As U. S. English put it in one of its recruitment brochures:

> The United States has been spared the bitter conflicts that plague so many countries whose citizens do not share a common tongue. Historic forces made English the language of all Americans, though nothing in our laws designated it the official language of the nation.

> But now English is under attack, and we must take affirmative steps to guarantee that it continues to be our common heritage. Failure to do so may well lead to institutionalized language segregation and a gradual loss of national unity (U. S. English 1984: 144).

Leaders of this political movement extend and develop their argument for national unity by stressing the inclusive and egalitarian consequences of a policy aimed at linguistic assimilation. That is, not only is linguistic assimilation good for the country as a whole (by excising the ethnolinguistic basis for internal conflict) but it is good for linguistic minorities as well. By advancing the true interests of linguistic minority members, assimilation will thereby remove some of the motivation for social and political conflict by reducing the causes of discontent.

Language shift to English will make language minority group members better off because, fundamentally, the U. S. is an English-speaking
country, and socio-economic and political upward mobility can be achieved best by individuals who have mastered the national language. Another whole thread of assimilationist discourse, then, is designed to show that what is euphemistically termed bilingualism is a dead-end street for members of language minorities. Bilingual education, for example, segregates Limited English Proficient (LEP) children and prevents them from fully mastering English, thereby consigning them to marginal lives apart from and subordinate to the mainstream of U.S. society (see, e.g., Porter 1990; Rodriguez 1982).

Similarly, policies of linguistic access (e.g., the provision of election materials and public services in languages other than English) only encourage language minority members to remain in their ethnic enclaves, thereby dooming them to continued marginalization in U.S. society. Believing that genuine bilingualism is impossible, assimilationists assert that only language shift to English will enable the integration and upward mobility of language minority persons in this country.

From this assimilationist perspective, then, it is very clear that linguistic assimilation is inherently inclusive and egalitarian, whereas policies promoting linguistic balkanization contribute to the continued socio-economic and political marginalization of language minority group members. A similar point has been made by Stephen Steinberg: ‘Throughout American history ethnicity has been preserved most authentically by those groups who, for one reason or another, have remained economically marginal’ (Steinberg 1982: 53). To the extent that racial inequality is correlated with non-English language use, linguistic assimilation is an obviously ameliorative opportunity. From this perspective, it is pluralists, and not assimilationists, who are guilty of using language policy to perpetuate the continued subordination of some U.S. minority groups.

**English-only policy as racializing: The pluralist response to the assimilationist argument**

Underlying this assimilationist understanding of the relationship between language/culture and racial/ethnic equality are two assumptions that are subject to criticism by pluralists: first, that the United States is fundamentally an English-speaking country; and second, that an assimilationist, English-only governmental and policy regime is egalitarian (hence, not racist) because it treats everyone alike. The pluralist critique of these assumptions, along with the assimilationist response, will be outlined in turn.

1. **The U.S. as an English-speaking country**

The first contested assumption made by assimilationists is that the United States is, fundamentally, an English-speaking nation. While it
is undisputed that English has always been the dominant language of the country, pluralists argue that it cannot be asserted unproblematically that the United States is an English-speaking country. Every U. S. Census in which language use has been investigated has found many homes in which the primary language is something other than English. The 2000 U. S. Census found that nearly 18 percent of the population over age five speaks a language other than English in the home (U. S. Census 2001). In key states such as California, New York, Texas, and Florida, moreover, non-English language use is at least double that of the national average. On its face, therefore, it cannot be said that the U. S. is simply an English-speaking country.

The assimilationist explanation of these facts is that, while present in the country, non-English languages are best understood as temporary phenomena resulting from voluntary immigration. Accordingly, multilingualism is not a fundamental part of the U. S. national identity. Further, because immigrants have chosen to come to the U. S. A., they have a moral obligation to adapt as quickly as possible to their new country’s national language by adopting English as their new language. While they are free to use their native languages in their homes, this should be a private decision, having nothing to do with governmental policy (Imhoff 1990). Immigrant parents, moreover, would do well by their children to see that their youngsters’ primary language is English. In the interests of both national unity and the social mobility of recent immigrants, government policy should be rigorously assimilative in intent and effect.

The pluralist response to this understanding of non-English language use is a critique of its historically false assumptions. Understanding the historical context of U. S. multilingualism is an essential first step toward grasping the racializing nature of an assimilationist language policy. And in this context, international migration is not an adequate explanation for how the United States became a multilingual country, despite the fact that most present-day non-English speaking residents in the U. S. are immigrants. It is important to recognize that many minority language communities became part of the United States through conquest and annexation (e. g., hundreds of American Indian tribes, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans), and not through immigration.

Further, these coercive means of incorporation were accompanied and followed by officially sanctioned social processes of domination and exclusion that were racializing in nature, and that included the disparagement of the cultures and languages of these minoritized peoples. That is, language and culture were centrally implicated in the social construction of Western theories of European racial superiority.

In the United States, as Reginald Horsman (1981) has documented, a highly developed racial ideology of ‘Anglo-Saxonism’ coalesced by 1850
from several streams of British, American, and western European thought. As Horsman summarized:

From their own successful past as Puritan colonists, Revolutionary patriots, conquerors of the wilderness, and creators of an immense material prosperity, the Americans had evidence plain before them that they were a chosen people; from the English they had learned that the Anglo-Saxons had always been peculiarly gifted in the arts of government; from the scientists and ethnologists they were learning that they were of a distinct Caucasian race, innately endowed with abilities that placed them above other races; from the philologists, often through literary sources, they were learning that they were the descendants of those Aryans who followed the sun to carry civilization to the whole world. (Horsman 1981: 5)

Not only could nineteenth century Anglo Americans find succor in the belief of their own ‘inherent’ superiority, their ‘… new racial ideology could be used to force new immigrants to conform to the prevailing … system, and it could also be used to justify the sufferings or deaths of blacks, Indians, or Mexicans’, who were considered unassimilable (Horsman 1981: 5).

This racialist ideology of Anglo-Saxon superiority accompanied and was developed in conjunction with the long expansion of the United States from a fledgling country along the Atlantic coast to a continent-wide world power. In addition to its previous applications to African Americans and Native Americans, then, the ideology of European racial superiority became the nineteenth century lenses through which Anglo Americans viewed the conquered Mexicans, other Latin Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Asians as they marched to their Manifest Destiny along the westward path of the sun.

These patterns of racialist ideology were inextricably intertwined with patterns of practice that created, reinforced, and maintained the system of racial hierarchy in the United States. Among the best-known of these practices were the enslavement of African Americans and their subsequent subjugation through ‘Jim Crow’ segregation laws; systematic decimation and ‘removal’ of Native Americans to reservations; the conquest of Mexico and annexation of nearly one-half of its territory in 1848, along with subsequent stripping of most Mexican American land ownership; the enactment of ‘aliens ineligible for citizenship’ laws to prevent Asian Americans from owning land and/or engaging in a variety of commercial and civil activities; the West-coast ‘internment’ of Japanese-origin Americans during World War II; and a racially-segmented labor system that included labor repression, a ‘dual wage’ system, occupational
stratification, and the use of racial minorities as a ‘reserve labor force’ (see, e.g., Barrera 1979; Karenga 1982; Takaki 1987; Takaki 1989).

In the context of this essay, it is important to note that language played an important role in both the ideology and practice of the system of racialized domination that held sway in the U.S. prior to the Second Reconstruction of the 1960s. With respect to ideology, for example, one of the most important strains of Anglo-Saxon racist thought focused on the superiority of the English language as a derivative of German culture. The linguistic strain of nineteenth century American racist thinking had its origins in the development by philologists of a highly elaborate myth concerning the ‘Aryan’ race. As summarized by Horsman:

... a whole scholarly base had been created for the affinity between language and race, and what was best in Europe and the world was increasingly ascribed to that people, soon generally to be called Aryan, who had pressed westward out of central Asia to revitalize the Roman Empire and eventually dominate Europe and the world. (Horsman 1981: 36)

Further, in this new science of philology ‘the identity of race and language was taken for granted, and race was exalted as the basis of a nation’ (Horsman 1981: 35).

The mythology developed by the philologists of Aryanism held that these people ‘followed the sun’ to the west, gradually ‘purifying’ their own culture and that of the world to new heights of excellence and accomplishment. Since they were to the west of Germany, accordingly, British philologists held that the Anglo-Saxon people were a ‘new and improved’ strain of Aryans, as was their language. To the British, ‘The Saxons became the elite of an elite’ (Horsman 1981: 38). Inasmuch as the United States understood itself as an off-shoot of the Anglo-Saxons, and even further to the west, one can imagine the attractiveness of this myth to Anglo American readers in the nineteenth century.

With respect to patterns of behavior during this period of racial domination in the U.S., language policies and practices were primarily indirect and, on the surface, appeared to be aimed at linguistic assimilation. That is, with the exception of the criminalization of teaching English literacy to slaves in the South, Anglo Americans did not try to stop members of racial minority groups from learning the English language. Indeed, language contact between racial minority members and Anglo Americans was expected to result in some degree of language shift to English, though expectations were generally limited. This is particularly evident with respect to educational policy. Each of the peoples of color
described above – Native, African, Latino, Asian/Pacific – was subjected to educational discrimination in several ways.

First, each group was extended the benefits of public education more slowly and more grudgingly than were European Americans, despite the fact that they too were taxed for public education. Second, when education was extended to them, it was typically done through segregated and inferior schools. Third, the groups’ cultures and languages were disparaged by public educators and other community leaders, and these communities were accordingly denied the opportunity to maintain and perpetuate their heritage cultures through the public schools. And fourth, even in the face of these visible forms of rejection and exclusion by the dominant group in the society, the education that was offered was exclusively assimilationist in orientation (Weinberg 1995; Baron 1990: 164–166).

The net effect of these educational practices was to provide important cultural supports for the continued racial domination of peoples of color by white Americans. That is, in the larger context of racial domination described above, the simultaneous provision of inferior, truncated and segregated public education in the dominant culture and language, together with the disparagement and denial of their own cultures and languages, amounted to a cultural foundation virtually designed to perpetuate their continued exclusion and subordination. The triple message delivered to minority youths (and their parents) was clear: ‘You are a member of an inferior race and you have an inferior culture; if you want to better yourself you will learn our culture and language; still, because you are inferior, we don’t expect you to do as well as one of our own.’ Anthropologist John Ogbu has referred to this system of education as ‘caste-like’ in its assumptions and effects (Ogbu 1978).

There is evidence that the dominant economic interests were very much aware of these effects in communities where these racialized groups played important, though subordinate, roles in the labor force. In the early 1930s, for example, a Dimmit County, Texas onion grower was quoted as follows on the subject of the education of Mexican American children:

The little education they get in schools here spoils them, and makes them trifling. They become beggars or bootleggers, or seek some easy way of making a living. They don’t want to do this [onion clipping] or other work. … But the more ignorant they are, the better laborers they are. (quoted in San Miguel 1987: 51)

There is an important difference, then, between the historical experiences of the racial minorities of the United States and the European immi-
grants to the same country in the realm of public education. Whereas both sets of people were pressured to adopt the dominant language and culture, the racialized minorities were pressured to do so in a context that offered an ‘incomplete’ form of assimilation, a form which promised continued separation and subordination. Weinberg summarized the differences as follows:

Neither the German nor any other European group saw its children consigned to deliberately inferior and segregated schools. Nor were they denied the political means to protect their group interests. If their traditions failed to escape ridicule, it occurred to nobody that their culture should be annihilated, as was that of the Indians. When the children of European immigrants sought entry into schools and colleges financed in part by federal funds derived from land grants, they were beneficiaries of a bounty that was denied Puerto Ricans on the island as well as the other three special minorities [i.e., African Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans] on the mainland. (Weinberg 1995: 6)

To summarize, then, pluralists argue that there is an historical context to U. S. multilingualism that involves far more than voluntary immigration by individuals and families, followed by a smooth transition to English-only language use in one or two generations. The cultures and languages of peoples who were conquered, annexed, and racialized are intimately intertwined with the reality of the U. S. A. as a multilingual country. And it is not irrelevant to the contemporary political conflict over language policy that many of today’s non-English speakers come from peoples who were recipients of these historical beliefs and social practices.

2. Assimilation policy and the structure of contemporary racialization

In general, assimilationists have responded to the above pluralist history lesson with the assertion that, ‘yes, terrible things happened to racialized minorities in U. S. history, but that was in the past: those beliefs and practices were abandoned in both policy and popular opinion in the 1960s.’ So, while racializing beliefs and behaviors were common in the United States prior to the 1960s, they are no longer prevalent patterns. Equally important, if the U. S. is to progress toward the kind of country it should become, it is necessary that racial distinctions and identities be strictly erased from public policy and governmental action. Only a race-neutral policy regime can produce both justice and the common good.

Sociologist Nathan Glazer articulated the main themes of the assimilationist response to the tragedies of U. S. history in his 1978 critique of
racially focused affirmative action policies. While acknowledging the racist injustices in the country’s past, Glazer attacked the purported view of pluralists that ‘racism defines our history’, arguing instead that U.S. history is best seen as a long, but progressive struggle toward ever-greater inclusion so that by the 1960s the United States was finally ready to admit to full membership individuals from every part of the world, of any background, on terms of equality (Glazer 1978). The bitter irony of U.S. history, as Glazer saw it, was that just as the country’s white majority was ready to accept peoples of color as equal members of the polity, leaders of racialized minority communities turned away toward self-segregation. Thus, the ‘new threat’ to social peace and justice in the United States came not from white racists, Glazer asserted, but rather from ‘the pressure of those recently subordinated to inferior status’. And the nature of this threat was:

that the nation would ... be permanently sectioned on the basis of group membership and identification, and that an experiment in a new way of reconciling a national polity with group distinctiveness would have to be abandoned. (Glazer 1978: 7)

In addition to this historical interpretation, Glazer’s 1978 treatment articulated the second staple of assimilationist argument regarding the appropriate social structure of the American present. Specifically, Glazer added two more components to the country’s new political consensus regarding ethnic and civic identity. Besides accepting as equals individuals from all ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds, Glazer asserted that the American paradigm for democratic equality meant that ‘no group ... would be required to give up its group characteristics and distinctiveness as the price of full entry into the American society and polity’, but that equally important: ‘This was to be a union of states and a nation of free individuals, not a nation of politically defined ethnic groups’ (Glazer 1978: 5). In other words, while Americans are free to be as ethnic as they wish, their ethnic diversity must remain a private matter, having no legitimate place in the country’s public policy.

Another assimilationist, Linda Chavez, has made a similar assertion specifically in relation to language policy:

If Hispanic parents want their children to be able to speak Spanish and know about their distinctive culture, they must take the responsibility to teach their children these things. Government simply cannot – and should not – be charged with this responsibility. The best way for Hispanics to learn about their native culture is in their own communities. Chinese, Jewish, Greek, and other ethnic communities have long
established after-school and weekend programs to teach language and culture to children from these groups. Nothing stops Hispanic organizations from doing the same. (Chavez 1991: 164)

For assimilationists, then, the appropriate structure of ethnolinguistic diversity in the U.S. is best understood as a private matter, much like the country’s religious diversity. Ethnic and racial group memberships must have no bearing on, or relationship to, citizenship in the U.S. polity. Civic equality, in this understanding, has to do with the equal rights of individuals. Just as government should make no laws respecting an establishment of religion, government should make no laws respecting corporate memberships in ethnic groups (including, of course, the protection or promotion of minority languages).

The pluralist critique of this assimilationist understanding of the relationships between group identity, culture, and the state centers on the nature of social structure. First, pluralists argue, assimilationists err in assuming that history need have no significant impact on individuals in the present. Since all individual identities are shaped by social forces over which we have little control, to assume that we can simply forget the historical legacies of negative stereotyping which constitute one of the most important boundary-maintaining processes of racialization is sheer fantasy (see, e.g., Bobo 1997). Both those who are advantaged by racialization (e.g., European Americans who are normalized as the prototype for Americans) and those who are disadvantaged by it are to some significant degree bounded by history (see also, e.g., Almaguer 1994; Omi and Winant 1994; Young 1990).

For many pluralists, the significance of this for the language policy debate is that shifting to English-only language use will not result in genuine assimilation for members of racialized minority groups, and this is so because language is only one of several markers used in U.S. society to racialize Latinos, Asian/Pacific Americans, and Native Americans, as well as African Americans. As a consequence, racialized groups who give up their cultural practices (e.g., language) in hopes of complete assimilation find themselves without some of the cultural resources that might be useful in combating racialized domination. This was the point made by Asian American legal activist Kathryn Imahara when she told a reporter:

I grew up in an English-only household. I was told, ‘You’re not a Japanese. You’re American.’ When I finally realized that it doesn’t matter that I went to a top law school, that I continue to be judged by the color of my skin, the slant of my eyes, and the color of my
hair ..., without that culture I’m left with a shell. (Orlando Sentinel Tribute 1993)

It is instructive to note that this line of argument is very similar in discursive structure to that of the 1960s black power thesis rejecting the strategic and moral adequacy of the Civil Rights Movement’s dominant goal of integration. For example, Kwame Turé (formerly Stokely Carmichael) and Charles Hamilton’s book, *Black Power*, spoke directly to the futility of individual integration in a society unprepared to assimilate black Americans as such. The practice of integration, they argued,

has meant that a few blacks ‘make it,’ leaving the black community, sapping it of leadership potential and know-how.... [Those who are thus absorbed into the white community] become meaningless showpieces for a conscience-sooathed white society. Such people will state that they would prefer to be treated ‘only as individuals, not as Negroes’; that they ‘are not and should not be preoccupied with race.’ This is a totally unrealistic position. In the first place, black people have not suffered as individuals but as members of a group; therefore, their liberation lies in group action. This is why SNCC – and the concept of Black Power – affirms that helping individual black people to solve their problems on an individual basis does little to alleviate the mass of black people. Secondly, while color blindness may be a sound goal ultimately, we must realize that race is an overwhelming fact of life in this historical period. There is no black man in this country who can live ‘simply as a man’. (Turé and Hamilton 1992: 53–54)

The second component of the pluralist critique of assimilationist views on the social structure of identity, culture, and the state is focused on the continuing inegalitarian bias institutionalized in contemporary U.S. society. Assimilationists want to privatize minority languages and cultures, sealing them off from politics and public policy. Pluralists argue that this has the effect of institutionalizing a racialized cultural hegemony that is blind to its own inegalitarianism.

If history has constructed the United States as, in fact, a multilingual country (through conquest, annexation, and other forms of involuntary incorporation, as well as through immigration), and if the social identities of ethnolinguistic minorities are relatively durable social constructions informing the lives of individuals in U.S. society, then a public policy pushing toward linguistic assimilation cannot be construed as inclusively egalitarian. While a state may be relentlessly secular in order to purge itself of any religious establishment, it cannot be neutral in the
same way in respect to language use. The state must employ language in order to exist at all. And if the state privileges one language in a society that is fundamentally multilingual, it cannot be said to be neutral in the sense of treating all individuals equally under the law (see Kymlicka 1989, 1995, for an extensive philosophical argument in defense of this point from liberal premises).

Indeed, far from being ethnically neutral and inclusive in its impact on racialized language minority groups, a mandatory assimilationist policy underlines and reinforces the social structure of racialized inequality. As numerous analysts have demonstrated (see, e.g., Bobo 1997; Goldberg 1993; Solomos and Back 1995), a new racism has developed in recent decades in which specific cultural forms have come to signify racialized identities, particularly where traditional biologically-based racist attributions have become socially and politically disreputable. As Solomos and Back summarize the point: ‘The writings on new racism show how contemporary manifestations of race are coded in language which aims to circumvent accusations of racism. In the case of “new racism” it is quite common for race to be coded as culture’ (1995: 36).

In the context of a racially stratified country such as the U.S.A., in which the historical development of racialized identity formations has been intertwined with important linguistic and other cultural divisions, an assimilationist English-only language policy will be racist in that it perpetuates the unjust social inequality between different ethnolinguistic groups that are equally American. Urciuoli (1996) demonstrates this argument in her micro-social analysis tracing the linkages between racialized class identities and Spanish language use for Puerto Ricans living in New York. She argues that in New York (and, by implication, elsewhere in the U.S.), the use of Spanish by Puerto Ricans is an integral part of a ‘race/class conflation’ in which

... black or Hispanic or Puerto Rican become metonyms for (naturally connected to) the idea of an underclass. In this metonym, class/race difference becomes morally marked. Activities seen as typical of bad citizens (dropping out of school, becoming teenage mothers, taking drugs, committing crimes, going on welfare) are habitually associated with, for example, Puerto Ricans, and become ‘explanations’ for their ‘failure.’ Terms that do not fit the moral picture disappear from the discourse.

Language figures into this race/class conflation in several ways. Hege-monically, Spanish itself is regarded as a barrier to class mobility because it displaces English. Accents, ‘broken’ English, and ‘mixing’ become signs of illiteracy and laziness, which people are morally obli-
As a result of this language/race/class conflation, Urciouli concludes: ‘Being “low class” and Puerto Rican or black are unmarked with respect to each other, habitually and typically associated. Like a default setting, this conflation is the normal point of reference unless it is specifically (never permanently) reset’ (Urciuoli 1996: 27). The underlying assumption of Urciouli’s pluralist analysis, of course, is that the United States is fundamentally a multilingual country, in which the Spanish language is as fully American as is English and should be treated as such.

Once again it is instructive to note the rhetorical parallels between this pluralist argument and the black power position articulated by Turé and Hamilton:

‘Integration’ as a goal today speaks to the problem of blackness not only in an unrealistic way but also in a despicable way. It is based on complete acceptance of the fact that in order to have a decent house or education, black people must move into a white neighborhood or send their children to a white school. This reinforces, among both black and white, the idea that ‘white’ is automatically superior and ‘black’ is by definition inferior. For this reason, ‘integration’ is a subterfuge for the maintenance of white supremacy… . [This] will not change until black people become equal in a way that means something, and integration ceases to be a one-way street. Then integration does not mean draining skills and energies from the black ghetto into white neighborhoods… . The goal is not to take black children out of the black community and expose them to white middle-class values; the goal is to build and strengthen the black community.

‘Integration’ also means that black people must give up their identity, deny their heritage. ... The fact is that integration, as traditionally articulated, would abolish the black community. The fact is that what must be abolished is not the black community, but the dependent colonial status that has been inflicted upon it.

The racial and cultural personality of the black community must be preserved and that community must win its freedom while preserving its cultural integrity. Integrity includes a pride — in being black, in the historical attainments and contributions of black people. No person can be healthy, complete and mature if he must deny a part of himself; this is what ‘integration’ has required thus far. This is the essential
difference between integration as it is currently practiced and the concept of Black Power. (Turé and Hamilton 1992: 54–55)

In short, pluralists argue that the assimilationist solution for language difference in the United States denies the realities of an inegalitarian social structure in such a way that it is blind to its own racialized order of privilege. Because it works to perpetuate an institutionalized structure of inequality in which Anglophone European Americans are systematically and unjustifiably privileged in relation to peoples of color, some of whom continue to speak languages other than English, a policy of linguistic assimilation to English-only cannot avoid a justifiable charge of racism.

Analysis and conclusion

Coming to terms with the disagreement between pluralists and assimilationists on the question of language policy and racial domination requires a fuller discussion of the concepts of race and racialization. As most social scientists have recognized for several decades, racial categories are not created in nature (Banton 1988). Rather, they are social constructs imposed upon biological patterns by the human imagination and through human discourse. Racial groups are just as much ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1983) as are nations. They are also just as real as nations in the world in which we live, but because they are socially constructed, their boundaries and meaning are subject to on-going (and contentious) change and redefinition.

Since all social identities are inherently contestable (in that they involve ‘imagined communities’ that might be imagined differently), they inevitably involve power relations. Those able to bring the most effective and compelling resources to bear on the boundary definition process of any individual or group will to that degree be successful in defining the boundaries of any particular identity. At the individual level, you and I will differ to some degree about exactly who I am, and the outcome of this dispute involves a relationship in which each side has resources to bring to bear. You may assert, for example, that I am obviously a Latino, whereas I may firmly insist that I am ‘simply an American’. Who is correct? In a very important sense, the ‘correct’ answer will depend on the power resources (most of which are embedded in social formations) each of us is able to mobilize in our relationship.

Because of this reality, the dispute between assimilationists and pluralists over the implications of language policy for racial inequality is inherently political and cannot be resolved ultimately at the level of scholarly discourse alone. Is an ‘American’ an English-speaking person? Or do
Americans speak a variety of languages, only one of which is English? Will those members of racialized minorities – immigrants or not – who become fluent in English be treated as full members, social and political equals in respect to Anglophone European Americans? Or will Asian/Pacific and Latino Americans – even those who are fourth or fifth generation U.S. citizens – continue to be asked the common question: ‘Where did you learn to speak English so well?’ In a very real sense, the contemporary U.S. conflict over language policy will provide the answers to these questions, and they will necessarily be political answers.

There is some survey research evidence that a strong connection exists among the U.S. electorate between racialized social group identities and language policy attitudes. In an analysis of the sources of opposition to bilingual education among Anglos, for example, Huddy and Sears (1990: 130) found that ‘... racial attitudes predicted more of the overall variance than did nonracial symbolic predispositions, and symbolic racism, in particular, was the most powerful variable’.

Similarly, in an analysis of California survey data on (mostly) Anglo opinion regarding the state’s 1986 official English initiative, Citrin, Reingold, Walters, and Green (1990) found that ‘... negative sentiments about cultural minorities [i.e., Asian Americans and Latinos] are associated consistently with opposition to bilingualism and approval of the hegemony of English’ (ibid: 553). Indeed, they concluded that ‘... feelings about American nationality and affect toward minority groups were the primary attitudes engaged by language policy and each exerted a strong independent influence on mass preferences’ (ibid.: 556).

In a related public opinion study, Citrin, Reingold, and Green (1990) looked at (mostly) Anglo concerns about the impact of non-European origin immigration on American national identity. Finding identity politics at the core of disquiet about the country’s changing demographic composition, they stated that ‘... a major source of opposition to cultural minorities among the majority ethnic group in America is the perception that they fail to conform to cherished notions of Americanism’ (ibid.: 1142). Further, they concluded that this perceived failure to conform is most profoundly related to the issue of language: ‘In the present study, we found that beliefs about American identity exerted their strongest influence on issues involving the status of English, where the problem of cultural identity is transcendent’ (ibid.: 1148). It is not surprising, therefore, that a May 1998 Los Angeles Times Poll found that the strongest reason given by prospective voters for favoring California’s Proposition 227 was agreement with the statement: ‘If you live in America, you need to speak English.’ Fifty-seven percent of respondents favoring Proposition 227 cited that statement as their primary reason, with
the next most supported rationale receiving only 12 percent support (Decker 1998).

Racialization is a social process whose point is inequality. No one is tagged as racially Other unless that act reduces the other to an excluded and/or subordinate position in reference to the person doing the tagging. Like all social group identities, moreover, the boundaries used to mark the Other in racialization are highly variable and typically multiple in number (Goldberg 1993). As a process, racialization works by rendering others as having certain characteristics (one of which has often been language) so foreign or ‘alien’ that it is impossible to conceive of being equal members of the same political community with those so racialized.

With respect to language policy, it is important to notice that in the contemporary U.S.A. the agency of racialization in this process is embedded in hegemonic cultural assumptions (so dominant as to appear to be ‘common sense’) constituting the ideological frame within which language use is understood (Schieffelin et al. 1998; Blommaert 1999). Since it is ‘obvious’ within this ideological frame that the U.S.A. is an English-speaking country, proponents of assimilationist language policy can claim with great sincerity to be inclusive in their orientation toward ethnolinguistic minorities while acting to exclude these very same communities from equal membership in the national community.

Because of its widespread use in this fashion as a boundary marker, language (a cultural phenomenon) is deeply connected to race in that both are embedded in identity politics. Put differently, the root of the contemporary conflict over language policy in the United States is not language as such, but political identity. At the heart of U.S. language policy conflict is a fundamental disagreement over what is meant by statements such as ‘We, the American people’. What is it that makes Americans (or members of any other national community) ‘the people’ in a constitutively political sense? In light of this, the politics of language in the U.S.A. is best understood as a species of identity politics.

In view of the analysis outlined above, the cultural hegemony of the English language in the United States poses a serious dilemma for the project of racial democracy in the United States. On the one hand, the belief that English is the normal language of the country is so powerful a presence that it reigns as common sense, and this belief easily commands huge electoral pluralities in a polity that typically equates democracy with majority rule. Further, because of its hegemonic status, the path to upward mobility for non-English speakers lies most obviously in the direction of early and efficient acquisition of English language fluency.

On the other hand, however, history has rendered the United States a multilingual country in which the vast majority of today’s non-English
speakers are also members of racialized minority groups, and whose languages are often stigmatized as important markers of those racialized identities. For these groups, English language dominance in the United States is intimately intertwined with a racialized white dominance in which the path toward social equality is highly uncertain. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to see how a policy of linguistic assimilation could render justice to groups so stigmatized.

In the face of this dilemma, I have argued elsewhere, the best route to follow for U.S. policymakers is one of linguistic pluralism combined with measures designed to reduce the economic inequality typical of members of ethnolinguistic minorities. By linguistic pluralism I mean specifically an English Plus policy approach that aims at bilingual fluency in both English and those other languages that are constitutive of U.S. multilingualism. The case for that policy approach cannot be pursued here, but it is hoped that the close linkage of race and culture has been established in relation to language policy in the United States. What links them together, ultimately, is their embeddedness in a politics of identity with important stakes for both language minority groups and the country as a whole.

Notes

1. Previous versions of this essay were presented at conferences of the American Association for Applied Linguistics, the American Political Science Association, and the Western Political Science Association, and at the Third International Symposium on Bilingualism. The author thanks the essay’s discussants on those occasions, the anonymous reviewers who read and critiqued this version, as well as California State University, Long Beach, for support in its preparation.

2. For a fuller description of recent language policy conflicts in the United States, see Schmidt (2000), especially Chapter One.

3. Others, moreover, became part of the United States population as a result of U.S. foreign policy interventions and not through individual ‘voluntary’ migration (e.g., Pacific Islanders, Filipinos, Cubans, Cambodians, Vietnamese).


6. Most Americans, even the most committed assimilationists, have no quarrel with bilingualism as such. Nearly everyone believes that their own children would be better off if they were fluent in two or more languages. Similarly, U.S. television advertisers know that ‘foreign’ accents that come in upper-class settings are attractive to most Americans and can be used to sell myriad expensive products.

References


