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ENGLISH AS OFFICIAL STATE LANGUAGE IN OHIO: ECONOMY TRUMPS IDEOLOGY

IN THIS CHAPTER, I examine a case of proposed language legislation in the US state of Ohio in which market concerns appear to override the **ideological** beliefs typically found in the English-only debate. Exploring the roots of the motivations for the English-Only movement in the United States has been taken up by many scholars. This considerable amount of research devoted to discovering these common pillars of the arguments for establishing legislation to designate English as the official language of various municipalities in the United States has established that the movement is fuelled by several ideologies including power, nationalism, demographic and cultural change (e.g. Schildkraut 2005; Schmid 2001; Tatalovich 1995). These notions are often described as unwavering steadfast beliefs, and only rarely do the discussions consider the possibility that they might take a back seat in a language legislation debate among the general public (e.g. Baron 1990; Citrin *et al.* 1990; Escamilla *et al.* 2003). Here, the framework of Ricento's (1998) 'deep values' is used to explore the failure of language legislation in the state of Ohio.

In 2005, a bill was introduced in the Ohio House of Representatives to make English the official language of the state. The stated purpose of House Bill #553 (HB553) [Ohio House Bill 553] was to 'require the use of the English language by state and local government entities in official actions and proceedings'. Government actions, proceedings and records in Ohio were already conducted in English. In fact, even The Ohio Commission on Hispanic/Latino Affairs, a state government agency, also conducts all of its official business in English. This legislation, therefore, simply assures the status quo with regard to the use of English and government business. Ohio, a Midwestern state that is comprised of 84.9 per cent persons reporting 'white' as their race in 2006 (United States Census Bureau), is not terribly diverse in terms of ethnicity. In addition, according to the US Census Bureau, in 2000 61 per cent of Ohioans reported that they speak a language other than English at home. By comparison to the

national average (17.9 per cent) and states like California (39.5 per cent) and New York (28 per cent), it seems that English is not 'under threat' in Ohio. These factors have certainly raised the issue of the utility of such a bill. Nevertheless, even when *imaginary*, threats to the social order can propel members of the dominant group into action (Ricento 1998: 100). The arguments for proposing the Ohio bill rely heavily on the notion of 'unity': State Representative Courtney Combs, the bill's sponsor, refers to it as the 'Ohio English Unity Act'. Unity, and similar notions, are often invoked in language legislation campaigns in the United States.

In the Ohio case, however, the fear of the potential economic repercussions caused by the bill seemingly overrode the 'unity' and concurrent ideologies in spite of the ostensibly steadfast and unmovable nature of English-only ideologies. That is, after formal discussion in the House of Representatives, the bill was tabled¹ by a 65–28 vote. Newspapers reported that Ohio House Representatives were worried that the bill might negatively influence a pending Honda motor company decision about choosing Ohio or Indiana for the location of a new automobile plant. It appears that, in this case of English language legislation, the strong ideologies that support such legislation among Americans are not as powerful when pitted against money and jobs. This case-study explores, via interviews and relevant texts, the role of 'deep values' in language legislation and posits a weakness of the ideologies supporting such legislation in the face of practical issues. It concludes by suggesting that the complexity and the limitations of the ideologies behind the English-only position are often oversimplified.

Deep values

Unity is one of the more salient themes in the HB 553 debate as it is invoked by the bill's sponsor in naming the bill the 'Ohio English Unity Act'. Ricento (1998) provides a very useful and productive evaluation of unity and other factors that influence language policy in the United States and breaks down the complexity of the motivations that drive this kind of legislation. Via an analysis of the US Bilingual Education Act of 1968, he examines language policy in the United States and concludes that there are 'underlying, usually unstated or hegemonic frameworks' created by 'deep values' (1998: 89). For Ricento, 'deep values represent an accretion of national experiences, influenced by certain intellectual traditions' (ibid.). 'Deep values' are flexible, however. Each society has its own set of 'deep values' and they can change over time. In addition, it is not the case that all members hold all the same values. That is, 'deep values' are dominant but not universal. For Americans, one of these widely held 'deep values' is that 'unity and cultural integrity of the United States cannot abide cultural, including linguistic, pluralism' (1998: 90). Ricento describes other major dominant values that comprise American 'deep values'. They relate to shared historical experiences, belief in freedom from government intrusion and the belief that ethnolinguistic minority groups should not receive special protection to ensure the maintenance of their group. Examples of how the language of HB 553 and support for it, especially from the bill's sponsor, provide many examples of Ricento's 'deep values' will be discussed below.

Other research on English-only legislation also provides examples of the key role of deep values. For example, in their exploration of public attitudes to English-only

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legislation across the United States, Frendreis and Tatalovich (1997) conducted a **multivariate analysis** on data from a nationwide sample of the 1992 American National Election Study (NES). Respondents were asked 'Do you favour a law making English the official language of the United States, meaning business would be conducted in English only, or do you oppose such a law?' Frendreis and Tatalovich found that support for official English legislation was broad: 64.5 per cent indicated that they did support such a law (1997: 359). In addition, contrary to previous claims, they found that cultural/attitudinal variables are more important than demographic factors (e.g. partisanship, social class) in predicting support of English-only legislation (1997: 365). That is, they did not find that the commonly suggested hypotheses of racism, ethnic rivalry, class politics or partisanship were good predictors of responses to official English legislation. Their findings indicated that attitudes about an official national language in the United States 'are mostly tied to attributes regarding national identity and individuals' normative views about common identity and cultural diversity' (1997: 366). These attributes share many characteristics with Ricento's 'deep values' of unity and shared national experience.

Citrin *et al.* (1990) also explored survey data on English-only legislation in order to understand the mass appeal of such legislation. They conducted multivariate analyses on a variety of socio-political factors to find correlates among them (e.g. voting records, political party affiliation, social indices). They were specifically interested in 'the role played by feelings of national identity' (1990: 536). To that end, they constructed a 'Language Policy Index' (1990: 554) from responses to a questionnaire that aimed to indirectly measure a respondent's position on 'official English'. Their analyses of public opinion and language issues led them to the conclusion that the widespread support for English-only legislation is based largely on feelings of nationalism. They suggest that the popularity of official English legislation is the 'pervasive public desire to reaffirm an attachment to a traditional image of Americanism' (1990: 536). Here, again, we see the importance of "deep values" in the support for official English-language legislation.

Palozzi (2006) explored the role of multiculturalism and 'deep values' in official English legislation in Colorado. His data were comprised of surveys of Colorado voters before a 2002 election, which included official English legislation and surveys of university students in 2003. He found that both groups agreed that multilingualism is a good thing but also that a common language is important to national unity. 'This apparent discrepancy may illustrate the tension between espousing English as an important marker of American national identity and symbol of political unity, and acknowledging personal freedom' (2006: 34). That is, Americans are of two minds on the issue of official English; they feel that speaking English is part of what defines American citizenship but an individual's right to speak the language they choose also defines what it is to be an American. This duality is also present in the 1994 General Social Surveys (GSS), which reported that while 60 per cent of respondents favoured making English the official language of the United States and that government business should be conducted only in English, 61 per cent of those same respondents supported bilingual voting ballots. Palozzi (2006) shows us an example of duality in beliefs around language legislation. I suggest below, in conjunction with examples from the Ohio case, that this duality helps to weaken the strength of 'deep values' and enables it to be overruled by practicality.

The research discussed above has attempted to show a unifying theme in public opinion research on language legislation. That is, the strongest underpinnings for support of official English legislation are Americans' notions of what defines being American rather than issues such as overt racism, hostility, and social class conflict (see also Schildkraut 2005). Having examined the patterns in the ideologies supporting language legislation, we move on to the discourse about Ohio House Bill 553.

The sponsor of HB 553

It is important to note that the discussion surrounding the Ohio language legislation is not different from that of other US states' attempts at making English their official language and these themes have been widely discussed elsewhere (e.g. Baron 1990; Escamilla *et al.* 2003; Schildkraut 2005; Tatalovich 1995). The point of interest here is the reason for the failure of the bill. The bill's sponsor, Representative Courtney Combs (a Republican representing Hamilton County) states that '[The bill's] purpose was to promote a unifying stance by the state and allow everyone to celebrate cultural differences through a common language'. In interviews with the author and the press, Combs invokes aspects of 'deep values' such as unity and 'assimilation' to gain support for his bill. For example, in a newspaper article Rep. Combs refutes the idea that the bill is an 'English-only' bill by calling that nomenclature a 'scare tactic'. He said that he preferred the term 'unity' instead (Kidder 2006). In Rep. Combs' request to his House colleagues for co-sponsorship of HB 355, he exhibits Ricento's dominant American values:

English is the common bond that holds us together as a nation ... We are not dispelling those who do not speak English from our society; rather we are adding a bond between Ohioans ... By creating a common bond among all people, we are preserving the strong and rich histories that each culture brings to our great state.

(Ohio House of Representatives Internal Memorandum, personal communication)

Combs maintains consistently in interviews that he believes the bill is a means for uniting people.² When it was suggested to Combs by a colleague that the bill is 'divisive', he insisted that it was not divisive but 'uniting'. In an interview with the author, he cites a case in Cincinnati (the largest city in his district) where residents of a neighbourhood were not getting along because of the 'language barrier', suggesting that everyone could get along if they all spoke English. [...] Other ideologies were also present in the discussions in the HB553 debate.

Two other typical themes dominate Rep. Combs' discussion about why this bill should be passed: 'assimilation', and the 'American dream' (i.e. self-sufficiency). Assimilation to American culture, or the 'deep value' of rejecting pluralism, is something, for Combs, that immigrants should want to do and also requires speaking English. He indicated that he was inspired to propose the bill because he felt that it should be emphasized that if a person becomes an American citizen, he or she should learn English. As an example, he told a story of a friend who has a Mexican 'housekeeper'

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who does not speak English and does not want to learn English. He said that that [a] friend's German parents had immigrated to the United States and learned English, and he wondered why it is not 'emphasized' that people who come to the United States should learn English. He felt that being American means speaking English. Combs was quoted in *The Columbus Dispatch*: 'It makes us, in my opinion, all Americans if we speak the same language' (Siegel 2006b).

Another dominant value, achieving the American dream (i.e. anyone can achieve economic prosperity), is present in Combs' discussions about HB553. He believes that not learning English stands in the way of immigrants' economic success because learning English 'can make them very self-sufficient'. For Combs the belief in self-sufficiency and the achievement of the American dream are largely tied to economics. For example, he stated in an interview with the author that an immigrant's income increases by 23 per cent if they learn English and indicated that the answer for breaking 'the bonds of poverty' and having a 'better life' for immigrants is to learn to speak English. [...] In addition, according to Combs, learning to speak English is a way for immigrants to have power. He maintained that people who speak English exert control over immigrants who do not speak English because they cannot speak for themselves. They are controlled and suppressed for the benefit of those who can speak English. According to Combs, if encouraged properly, immigrants will learn English, assimilate, be self-sufficient and be able to control their own destiny. In sum, there are familiar dominant values in the discussions about HB553, and these values are taken up in the next section with regard to their weakness in the face of perceived economic pressure.

The HB 553 debate in the public

In this section, the public debate on HB553 is explored with special attention given to how that debate among the Representatives and in the media exemplifies the importance of market forces with regard to this bill. On 23 May 2005, the House voted in favour of 'tabling' the bill (sending the bill back to committee for revision or more research) with 65 votes for and 28 against. In these discussions about the bill, the negative economic ramifications of HB553 are frequently mentioned. The main economic arguments centered on assumptions that the construction of a Honda factory would provide jobs and income for Ohioans and, additionally, that a Honda factory would employ many Ohioans long-term. For example, a newspaper article by Jim Siegel of *The Columbus Dispatch* reporting on the 'English-only proposal' pointed directly at the opportunity to land a deal for a Honda plant in Ohio as the reason for the failure of the bill with this headline: 'House tables language bill: Lawmakers feared ruining Honda deal'. He indicated that some House representatives expressed fear that English-language legislation would ruin chances at securing a deal with Honda motor company to build a \$400 million plant in Ohio (Siegel 2006a). He wrote: 'Worried about how it might affect the state's efforts to lure a Japanese-owned automobile plant to Ohio, the Ohio House defeated a proposal to make English the official state language.'

He highlighted the economic ramifications of the bill further by stating that the plant would employ about 1500 people and that '... state officials don't want to give Honda any reason to choose Indiana over Ohio for its new plant.' Representative Jon Husted, the Speaker of the House, quoted by Siegel in the same article, confirmed his

own concerns about the economic ramifications of the bill 'If it ... prohibits success of things like recruiting Honda to Ohio, we want to make sure we're not creating barriers for those types of situations.' Another newspaper article about the bill echoed the context of 'barriers' expressed by the Speaker of the House and pointed directly to economics as the key reason for the failure of the bill:

The efforts of some Ohio lawmakers to have English declared the state's official language were defeated by their toughest opponent: common sense. House members' recent vote to kill an English-only measure isn't a matter of backing down; it's a case of embracing opportunity. The top spot on many lawmakers' agendas right now isn't what language people speak, but jobs for Ohioans ... Ohio is competing with Indiana for the [Honda] plant, and many House members wisely figured that a law that might make life difficult for Honda's Japanese executive and their families wouldn't help Ohio's chances. This is a perfect illustration of the global nature of business and why erecting barriers to the rest of the world is a bad idea.

('Carrot, not stick' 2006)

An editorial from the *Akron Beacon Journal* applauded the economic 'logic' of the tabling of the bill while emphasizing the highly symbolic nature of the measure:

An Ohio yearning to please Honda, hoping the Japanese automaker will build a \$400 million plant within the state's borders, would do well to resist making English its official language, signalling something less than open arms and bright smiles. Thankfully, a majority of the Ohio House embraced the logic last week, squashing a measure that would have unnecessarily stated the obvious: speak English here if you wish to succeed.

('Language lesson' 2006: 3)

Representative Combs, however, felt that the Honda factory should not have played a role in the fate of the bill. In an interview with the author, he indicated that he personally spoke with representatives of the Honda Corporation about how they felt about the bill: 'Basically their comment was "we're neutral on the bill".' However, other House members were not convinced about Honda's neutrality. House Representative, David R. Evans (R-77th District), who was present when the vote was taken to table the bill, indicated that the issue of the potential Honda plant was part of the discussion of the vote and the Speaker, Jon Husted, did not seem to support the bill (personal communication). In fact, according to Combs, Speaker Husted recommended that they delay voting on the bill until the Honda decision was made so as not to jeopardize Ohio's chances at landing the deal for a plant.

Although not as widely discussed, there were other kinds of economic objections. For example, the Director of the northern Ohio Sandusky County Department of Job and Family Services, in another newspaper article about HB553, discussed the important role that migrant workers played in that community: '[migrant workers are] a very important part of our economy here. It does not make sense to make it more difficult for them' (Sanctis 2005:1A). This strategy of emphasizing the economic importance of

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migrants also signals that the economic utility argument is strong among the competing ideologies of language legislation.

There were, to be sure, other objections to the bill that were not related to the economy, the Honda plant or migrants' influence on the economy. Racism, for example was not absent from the discussion. *The Columbus Dispatch* reported on comments on the bill by the president of the Ohio Hispanic Coalition who called it 'a bill about intolerance' (Courtney 2005). These kinds of objections were not, however, attributed to any legislators who had the power to vote against the bill. While some of the legislators voting against the bill may have held objections of this nature, they were not reported as having them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the failure of Ohio HB 553 is an example of the inadvertent (and what linguists would regard as positive) effect market forces may have on language policy and shows how the support for English-only legislation can be overruled by domestic economic concerns. However, the 'about turn' in relation to Honda is not as contradictory as it first appears. Ohio HB 553 has the typical English-only ideologies at its core. These ideologies are strong but the point here is that the 'commitment' to the ideology in this case depends in part on a strong economy. That is, 'the way in which an issue is framed is a crucial determinant of which attitudes influence preference formation' (Citrin *et al.* 1990: 536). Further, Citrin *et al.* (1990: 556) acknowledged that the surveys they analyzed were conducted during prosperous economic times and that the results may have been different if conducted during a period of economic uncertainty. In addition, another factor contributes to the weakness of the ideologies in this case. Because Americans believe that it is important for Americans to speak English while at the same time they believe people have the right to speak whatever language they want, there is a certain amount of duality at the centre of the ideologies. English-only legislation is underpinned by a cultural consensus about national identity that can be challenged by its own complexity. Therefore, such legislation is subject to being overruled by more salient transitory practical issues such as the local economy.

Schildkraut (2005) also provides compelling evidence of the complexity of the American belief system that provides a platform for language legislation and warns against 'monolithic scale measures' (2005: 199) of American identity. Citrin *et al.* (1990) point out, 'for most members of the majority language group in the United States the *tangible* [emphasis in original] personal costs and benefits of bilingual government services or "official English" are neither clear nor substantial' (1990: 535). Perhaps when the personal costs and benefits become tangible such as that highlighted by the possibility of the Honda factory, 'deep values' are backgrounded. The hegemonic frameworks that drive English-language legislation are underpinned by 'deep values' that are, themselves, a mélange of ideologies and experiences. As such, when some of the 'deep values' conflict with one another or important external factors, they cannot serve as a solid underpinning, allowing for the ideological support or 'framework' for a particular issue to tumble.

The Ohio case is certainly not the only case of practicality overriding traditional American values. Palozzi (2006: 34) also found in the Colorado case that for some

voters it was 'disdain for overly punitive and potentially costly litigation that turned otherwise pro-amendment people against it'. While 'symbolic values rather than material concerns are the predominant influence on mass preferences' (Citrin *et al.* 1990: 536), we must be mindful of the complexity of these symbolic values or 'deep values' and be aware of how that very complexity may render them weaker than they appear.

The debate is not yet over. Ohio House Bill 553 underwent revisions after its introduction; after it was tabled by the House of Representatives by a vote of 64 to 28 in May of 2006, it remained with the committee without being brought to the House floor for another vote. Representative Combs' office reported that illegal immigration issues had taken priority over HB 553. Honda ultimately chose the state of Indiana, Ohio's main competitor (and a state that does have an 'English-only' law), for the site of its new auto plant. Interestingly, in May 2008, the Ohio House passed a different bill (HB477) with a 54-42 vote that requires the use of the English-language by state and local government entities in official actions and proceedings, subject to certain exceptions. It awaits passage by the Senate, although Ohio Governor Ted Strickland indicated that he will veto the bill if it reaches him.

Notes

- 1 When a bill is "tabled", it is returned to the committee responsible for it for amendment or further consideration/research because the legislators feel it is not ready for a final vote.
- 2 While there are many points of interest in dissecting Comb's beliefs, it is not the purpose here to examine the fallacies of his arguments.

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