

“Speak the language of your flag”: American policy responses to nonanglophone immigrants

Dennis Baron

Prof. of English and linguistics

Univ. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign



Abstract:

US language policy in the 1900s sought to assimilate immigrants with bans on foreign languages, laws requiring English for government, schools and jobs, and patriotic campaigns equating good English with good citizenship. In 1918, the year in which Iowa governor William Lloyd Harding banned the use of foreign languages in public in the state—in schools and churches, at public meetings, on the train, and on the phone—the Chicago Woman’s Club launched “Better American Speech Week,” an event which aligned correct English with patriotic values and spread rapidly across the country.

Harding’s order sparked the arrest of a handful of farmers for using German on party lines, and though it was publicly endorsed by former president Theodore Roosevelt, the “Babel Proclamation” was greeted with widespread ridicule and protest. But Better Speech Week, which encoded patriotism, the assimilation of immigrants, and a rejection of minority languages and dialects, resonated with popular opinion and was embraced by schools and by the press.

The archives of the Chicago Woman’s Committee, which I will discuss in this presentation, yield new information on the organization’s annual Better American Speech campaign, which aligned correct English with patriotic values. In conjunction with Better Speech Week, schools and colleges around the country had students sign pledges to renounce both immigrant languages and immigrant English in favor of “the language of your flag,” as one poster called the prestige standard variety of English that the movement espoused. Some classes made posters, others wrote plays illustrating the deprivations of accented or slovenly speech. In a few schools, students were recruited to spy on their peers, reporting bad English much as their parents were reporting their neighbors for unAmerican activity. Children caught for crimes against the language were tried before tribunals of their peers, and when convicted were made to wear signs testifying to their shame. This was at the height of American involvement in World War I, after all, and exposing enemies of English was the least that children could do while their parents were busy exposing enemies of the state.

Better Speech Week is little-remembered today, but at the time it provided powerful propaganda for the new American isolationism, and it dovetailed with the immigration reforms of the 1920s that effectively shut America's borders to multilingualism for the next fifty years. Americans remained generally isolated from foreign languages until a second immigration reform in 1965 reopened the nation's gates to new waves of nonanglophones, prompting new, rancorous, attacks on foreign languages. Looking at this earlier English-only campaign puts today's attitudes toward nonanglophones in a historical context.