

Linguistic Diversity, Communication, and Language Policy: Implications for the American English

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Abstract

Worldwide economic and cultural exchanges have brought to bear a phenomenal level of cultural infusion and diffusion within and without the borders of the United States (Jackson, 2019). Effective intercultural communication has since become imperative for U.S. Americans as “these States” have quickly turned themselves into a multicultural and multilingual nation (Tamasi & Antieau, 2014). The purpose of this paper is to examine the current challenges facing the American English in such a linguistically diverse society where its citizens’ communication competence hinges upon their cultural and linguistic literacy. Analysis of this social phenomenon demonstrates the significant challenges facing the presently dominant status of the American English, which call for a language policy to facilitate its citizens’ gaining of a multicultural and multilinguistic literacy for developing their cultural and intercultural communication competence.

Key Words: Language policy, Linguistic diversity, Communication, American English, Lingua franca

Many analysts consistently fail to notice that the strength of American language policy is not in what is legally and officially stated but in the subtler workings of what I have called the covert and implicit language policy.

--Schiffman, 1996, p. 211.

As pointed out by Schiffman (1996), although the United States of America does not overtly claim and state its official language policy, covertly, the language of English has enjoyed its dominance and official status in the country ever since its colonial times. In the very beginning when the country was a colony of the British, English was the natural official language to use. A great majority of the settlers in the “new world” spoke English with only the minority of non-English speaking European immigrants spoke a language other than English. Over the years though, the overwhelming dominance of the American English continued and prevailed in “these States” which has effectively turned the country into a “graveyard” of minority languages (Edwards, 2010). The American English thus has persistently thrived and prevailed until ushering of the 21st century when worldwide economic and cultural exchanges have brought into the American society a phenomenal level of cultural and linguistic infusion and diffusion.

Given the current dominant and covertly official status of the American English in the United States, this paper examines the challenges facing the American English in such a culturally and linguistically diverse society where its citizens’ cultural and intercultural communication competence becomes increasingly imperative.

The author will first delineate and discuss the dominance of American English in the life of the U.S. Americans and then trace the development and formation of the U.S. linguistic culture. Further exploration and analysis of the issue of cultural and linguistic diversity in the American society are presented and discussed to demonstrate how the current dominance of the American English hinders its citizens' development of cultural and intercultural communication competence. Conclusions are drawn towards the end of this paper, and implications of this investigation are also presented and discussed.

The American English

As mentioned earlier, before the United States gained its independence, it was a British colony and as such, it inherited not only the English language but also much of the British culture. Concomitant with this inheritance came the power of the English language and the worldwide influence of the British culture before the Second World War as English was regarded as the "imperial tongue" in the world (Wiley & Lukes, 1996). In the early days of its independence, the American English and its culture were considered rather "provincial" and "its art was considered second-rate, especially in painting and literature, where European artists set the tone, defining quality and form" (Cismas, 2010, p. 389). Together with the development of its cultural identity in the 19th century, the American English gained its recognition from the world. Only with the appearance of authors such as Emerson and Thoreau who portrayed individualistic characters closely connected to natural and spiritual sources rather than tradition and social life, did the American language and literature has established its recognizable status in the English world (Schiffman, 1996).

This worldwide recognition of American language and literature was substantially enhanced after World War II when the United States emerged to be the world leaders in political, economic, social and cultural arenas. As an immigrant country, the American language and culture have always been impacted by the number of incoming immigrants. In the 18th and 19th centuries, for instance, language diversity in "these States" was mainly driven by immigration as many of the new immigrants spoke their native languages in addition to English (Jandt, 2020). What is worth noting, however, is the speed with which these "mother tongues" come to perish in the United States. While the "melting pot" permits ethnic identities to last into the third and fourth generations of immigrants, their native languages usually die by the second generation (Rumbaut, 2009) as American English is the dominant language "used in schools, colleges, business; in state, federal, and local administration; in health-care delivery, in the media, in sports, in entertainment, and is the primary language used by religious bodies in America" (Schiffman, 1996, p. 212).

Even in this age of worldwide economic and cultural exchanges with the phenomenal level of linguistic and cultural infusion and diffusion, the dominance of American English in the United States has become much more clumsily prominent and omniscient. The "imperial language" is now the lingua franca of the United States with its dominance permeated in the life of its citizens. It is the most spoken language of "these States"; it is the language of politics, economics, education, academic and social and cultural life of the people living in the U.S. It is indeed a privilege in the U.S. if one has gained competence in using the American English. Conversely, those who have not yet acquired competence in using the language are certainly disadvantaged, if not deprived in benefiting from the U.S. linguistic culture which cherishes its covert official language policy of American English.

The U.S. Linguistic Culture

Culturally, the United States of America is an individualistic country (Hofstede, 2010). Among the 53 countries and three regions investigated, Geer Hofstede (2001) found that the United States tops the list in his ranking of the cultural dimension of individualistic and collectivistic cultures in the world. In addition, migrants from Europe, regardless of their countries of origin, who came to populate North America, are found to be sufficiently individualistic to have made the decision to leave their native countries (Jandt, 2022) and settle down in North America. Chief of the cultural practices with people living in individualistic societies is how they come to define individuals when they meet each other for the first time. Instead of asking their family backgrounds and ancestry roots as a typical practice in collectivistic countries, individuals in individualistic cultures are first and foremost defined by what they do (professions), what they have achieved in life (accomplishment-orientation) and what kind of materialistic possession they have (Hofstede, 2010).

In his analysis of the U.S. linguistic environment, Schiffman (1996) pointed out that no explicit language policy in the U.S. does not mean that every language is on an equal footing to compete. On the contrary, the tacit U.S. official language policy is deeply embedded in its linguistic environment which he termed as the U.S. “linguistic culture”. It is precisely this linguistic culture of the U.S. that cherishes and perpetuates the dominant status of the American English in its society. To an extent, the U.S. linguistic culture is manifested in Americans’ daily life as such that it intimidates the development, or prohibits the thriving of minority languages in the U.S. as Schiffman (1996) continued:

In other words, the covert language policy of the United States is not neutral, it favours the English language. No statute or constitutional amendment or regulatory law is necessary to maintain this covert policy —its strength lies in the basic assumptions that American society has about language. These basic assumptions range from simple communicative competence in English to deeply held prejudices, attitudes, biases (often supported by religious belief), and other ‘understandings’ that constitute what I call American linguistic culture which is the locus of covert policy in this (or any) polity (p.213).

The core of this U.S. non-policy on languages demonstrates the belief, “prejudices, attitudes, biases, and other understandings” held by the majority of native American English speaker which, on the one hand, offers the majority a language privilege (Wiley and Lukes, 1996) and, on the other hand, is deeply rooted in the ideology of individualism that characterizes the U.S. American society. Proficiency in any given language would apparently renders its users privilege in the linguistic social environment. Together with the privilege though comes the power for individuals in that culture as language is the essential means of communication that empowers its speakers/users. Thus, efficient and effective communication is obtainable only when the communicators have gained language competence in that social-cultural milieu and further, as culture and communication is inseparable from each other (Whorf, 2012), communication competence cannot be developed fully without the empowerment of linguistic competence.

On the other hand, based on U.S. Americans’ cultural subscription to the ideology of individualism, linguistic incompetence in any circumstances is perceived as the individual’s failure to obtain success in the subject of learning. Immigrants who succeeded in acquiring competence in the American English after their arrival to the U.S. are typically viewed as fitting in well and have made the efforts to adapt to their new living environment (Jandt, 2020). Conversely, from the viewpoint of the majority native American English speakers, those immigrants whose linguistic competence is underdeveloped are simply not trying their best to fit in and, therefore, have failed in their linguistic and cultural adaptation to their adopted country.

What’s worth pointing out, however, is that we must understand one’s linguistic competence is closely associated with the person’s cultural identity as language is an expression of their cultures. The relationship between language and culture is also an inseparable one (Sapir, 1949) and as such, the process of learning a second language is the process of acquiring another cultural identity. As such, for a language learner, the acquisition of another language is the long process of obtaining another cultural identity. In other words, for all newcomers to the U.S., acquiring the American English means to engage in a process of culturally re-identifying themselves (Kramsch, 1998). This is, perhaps, the primary reasons for the “quickened death” of immigrants’ native language.

Language and Communication

With the understanding that no policy is a policy in the U.S. linguistic environment where American English has been the dominant covert official language spoken. In colonial times, this linguistic environment was taken for granted as most of the immigrants to “the new world” were coming from English speaking countries and culturally, the country was also known in the world as the “melting pot” in which immigrants were surrounded by a cultural environment of adopting the American cultural identity or resistance to being “melted” or assimilated would be futile. However, worldwide economic and cultural exchanges occurring this day and age has brought to the U.S. a massive wave of immigrants from non-Western countries (Edwards, 2010). The arrival of this group of immigrants to the U.S. has revived linguistic diversity in the U.S. according to Edwards (2010) as most of the immigrants brought with them their native tongues. Languages other than American English are now spoken by many Americans who have not chosen to engage in the language acquisition and or identify conversion process. More importantly, they also brought with them unique non-European characteristics such as the Asian cultures of collectivism rather than the U.S. American individualism. Their cultural inertia has effectively prevented them from “total assimilation” into the American “melting pot”.

As the trend continued, the population of U.S. Americans “speaking English only at home” steadily declined. For instance, the U.S. census data shows a steady decline of almost ten percent of this group of the population from 89.1% in 1980 to 79.7% in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

Although demographical changes in the U.S. calls for a language policy change that will promotes linguistic diversity in the country, the inertia of the U.S. linguistic culture remains to be a significant hindrance for the development of its citizens’ cultural and intercultural communication competence. The reason that the U.S. can no longer be regarded as a “melting pot” partially lies in the difficulty experienced by recent immigrants in being perceived as a member of the “melting pot”. Asians Americans, for example, are not being perceived as a group that can be totally melted into the “melting pot”. Okihiro (2014) has demonstrated this claim of not fitting in the ‘melting pot’ by analyzing and discussing the racial tensions in the U.S. Unlike the blacks and whites in the U.S., Asian Americans have been totally marginalized to the periphery” and as such, they are considered either “just like the blacks” or “almost whites”. Perhaps, because of this strong sense of not-belonging to the “melting pot”, those who feel alien to the American “mainstream” are inadvertently encouraged to keep speaking their native languages and/or keep subscribing to their original cultural identity. This social phenomenon, regardless of its origin, has increasingly become a significant barrier for effective communication between the American English speakers and those who speak languages other than the American English. This linguistic barrier impacts on the status quo of the American linguistic culture and hinders the U.S. Americans’ effective communication amongst themselves. Given the current linguistic diversity within the U.S. American society, to overcome this barrier and to enhance its citizens’ development of cultural and intercultural communication competence, it is high time for the U.S. to initiate a change of its covert language policy.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper sets off to examine the challenges facing American English in the culturally diverse United States where communication competence becomes imperative for its citizens. Analysis of the current U.S. linguistic environment informs us of the prevailing dominant status of the American English supported not by a covert official language policy unstated by the county, but also encouraged by a linguistic culture rooted deeply in the U.S. American individualism and the people’s belief in individual achievements.

In the era of cultural infusion and diffusion and when the U.S. has quickly turned itself into a multicultural society, it is high time for the U.S. to reconsider its unstated official language policy. Unlike the earlier settlers to this country, newcomers who speak a language other than American English found it increasingly difficult for them to completely be melted into the so-called “melting pot”, particularly when their linguistic identity is regarded as an integral part of their cultural identity. The newcomers’ inability to be assimilated in the “melting pot” has motivated and encouraged them to keep their linguistic identity which inadvertently becomes a significant challenge and barrier for their effective communication with their fellow Americans. The development of all U.S. Americans’ communication competence is thus hindered by their preferences of the languages they choose to speak. To enhance its citizens’ communication competence and promote cultural and linguistic diversity within and without the borders of the United States, findings of this paper suggest that the U.S. linguistic culture/environment be changed to one that is conducive to the development of its citizens’ linguistic communicative competence. It is therefore important for future research in this area to unpack the issues of how to initiate a change in the current U.S. linguistic culture which cherishes and perpetuates a covert official language policy that has increasing become a significant barrier for its residents’ effective communication.

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