In mailboxes all across the United States of America early in 1987 appeared a document headed “ENGLISH FIRST”. In these days of decline for the people of England and the speakers of their noble tongue, this looked like it could be good news, so I examined my copy with care. At the letterhead was a list of three officers and an advisory board composed of elected lawmakers from the legislatures of nearly twenty States. Big guns. I started to read the text. In short, strident paragraphs, it opens up with a number of frightening claims about what is happening in the United States, a great but now apparently imperilled country.

Tragically, many immigrants these days refuse to learn English! They never become productive members of American society. They remain stuck in a linguistic and economic ghetto, many living off welfare and costing working Americans millions of tax dollars every year.

Incredibly, there is a radical movement in this country that not only promotes such irresponsible behavior, but actually wants to give foreign languages the same status as English – the so-called “bilingual” movement.

Those damned radicals! Condoning expenditures from my taxes to institutionalize the unproductive torpor of linguistically stunted, welfare-scrounging aliens! It made my blood boil just to think about it.

The purpose of the document is to solicit signatures on “a Petition calling for a Constitutional Amendment to make English the official language of the United States”. The issue is much more important than mere respect for the language of Shakespeare and Milton, however. “This Amendment will stop a direct attack on our American way of life.” Indeed, English First is, the bottom of the notepaper reveals, a project of the Committee to Protect the Family. Ah, the family! How could any American not want to protect the family?

The document continued, in the underlined mode that daisywheel printers use to represent urgency:

If you and I fail to pass this Amendment now, the fragmentation of American society along language lines will be complete. We'll create a permanent underclass of unemployable citizens.

My disposable income; the English language; welfare scrounging; the
American way of life; the sanctity of the family; a horrible linguistic underclass of ne'er-do-wells lurking in our cellars; it was enough for me. I reached for my signature pen and my checkbook.

And then, for some reason, I paused for a moment to think. Not the intended reaction, surely: English First nearly had me where it wanted me, checkbook spreadeagled on the desk, veins standing out in my neck, pen poised. But the habits of the intellectual die hard, and unlike perhaps thousands of other readers who already had their checks in the envelope, I decided to read on through the two further pages of choppy, excited prose before endorsing the petition. And (curse of the educated) I found that knowledge I had gained during my linguistic education began to conspire with elementary logic and common sense to render disappointingly blunt the at first sharp edge of the English First attack. The adrenalin rush over, my customarily calm and analytical nature returned. I read on, and my reactions began to be less sympathetic.

Look what's happened in Canada, where radical bilingualists have held power in Quebec. It is now a criminal offense for companies not to give French equal billing with English. It's doubled the paperwork load, driven up the cost of doing business and forced businesses out of the province.

Now, hold on a minute: the Parti Québécois (PQ) is not a party of radical bilingualists. It is a party of radical anti-bilingualists. Its language policy, first promulgated in April 1977, was described the following year by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as “a brutal challenge to Prime Minister Trudeau's cherished aim of establishing official bilingualism as a reality across Canada” [Britannica Book of the Year, 1978, p. 236]). The language policy of the PQ was very much like the one being proposed under this Amendment. It was not the result of allowing state assistance for minority language groups in a nation dominated by English. Their policy was not bilingualism but francization. They made education in English illegal except under certain very narrow circumstances, and began imposing French as the language of business. Canada's language problems arise first and foremost from the underlying economic and demographic disparity, and secondly through intolerance. In Quebec, the francophone majority want a French First policy, and in the rest of Canada, French (like its speakers) is treated with utter contempt. (I saw a brief notice in a post office in Vancouver that was in French as well as English, as the Federal government requires, but it was so atrociously spelled and so stuffed with insultingly elementary grammatical errors that the French side might just as well have said "Frogs not welcome.") English First proposes that English speakers in California should embark
on a language policy exactly equivalent to the one adopted by the PQ when it attained power.

There are only 11 states that require English to take a driver’s license test.

Isn’t this for the Department of Motor Vehicles to decide? Are you sure, given that the number of visitors and short-stay temporary residents of the USA at any given time is in the millions, that you wouldn’t rather have drivers examined on driving in a language they handle fluently, rather than excluded from the legal driving community and forced to drive as outlaws? Isn’t it in the interests of the residents to have immigrants tested for driving fitness even during the period they are trying to learn English? How will they drive to their English classes? Isn’t competence in English a rather different issue from safety on the roads?

The leaders of the bilingual movement...have already forced 30 states to use foreign language ballots in national and local elections. If this continues, the next American President could well be elected by people who can’t read or speak English!

Couldn’t those people still elect their choice of President, regardless of whether English is the official language? The names are on the ballot, and proper names do not change under translation in most cases. Generally, even in Chinese and Japanese, specific foreign personal names are inserted without transliteration, as one can see from a glance at any linguistics article that has been translated into a language with a different script. One only has to be able to tell Gomez from Gephardt, or Diaz from Dukakis, or whatever turns out to be the choice in ’88.

In California, one county was forced to spend $3600 per ballot to satisfy bilingual laws. Another shelled out $6619 and no one used them at all.

No one used them? Where’s that unemployable underclass? Why weren’t they out voting in the candidates of choice for their particular linguistic subcastes, trying to ensure that the next American President is elected by people who can’t read or speak English?

Radical activists have been caught sneaking illegal aliens to the polls on election day and using bilingual ballots to cast fraudulent votes.

Not in the county where no one used the bilingual ballots, I assume. Anyway, why was it necessary for these sneaks to use bilingual ballots? Why could they not just sneak people in and use any ballot that was going? It’s representing the selected warm body as correlated with some name on the electoral roll that’s crucial. What does this voter fraud have to do with language in any way at all?

The National Education Association, the nation’s largest teachers union [hey, shouldn’t
that be teachers’ union if we really care about English? – GKP], sees bilingual education as a means to force schools to hire more teachers and swell the union ranks. Even the textbook publishers, who have visions of doubling their business, have gotten into the act.

Why would business double, for either group, assuming student-teacher ratios remain stable? Why would the English-speaking group of students need the Spanish version of the textbook, or vice versa?

The “English First” document I am quoting from is signed by Representative Jim Horn of the Texas legislature. Rep. Horn has many more strident paragraphs of undocumented assertion to offer, but even a cursory glance shows that the logic of his alarmist conclusions from those assertions is so faulty that one can have little faith in the rational basis for the proposition argued – namely that a 27th Amendment to the constitution of the United States is needed as “a simple and direct solution to the dangerous spread of ‘bilingualism’ in our society”. So what is going on?

Alas, it is all too clear. I well remember the last time I heard rhetoric like that with which Horn’s letter is stuffed. It was in Britain in the late 1960s; the subject matter was oddly devoid of reference to language problems (a real problem in some of Britain’s urban schools at that time), but harped solely on race. The voice was that of Enoch Powell, a right-wing junior government minister who overstepped the bounds of what even the Conservative Party would tolerate, and was expelled from the government for embarrassing it with his inflammatory anti-immigrant speeches. If Britain went on this way, Powell intoned, there would be terrible trouble. Dark, alien people were flooding the land. The could not be assimilated. They must be sent back to where they came from, before they engulfed us. He had anecdotes with all the power to render the hearer indignant that Horn’s tales of sneaky radicals have, and with a similar lack of documentation and explicitness. And it struck a chord in the hearts of some of the nastiest people ever to don an armband.

Yes, the fascists are back. The hallmark of the English First literature is not a desire to cherish the English language and the democratic traditions of the United States, but a hatred and suspicion of aliens and immigrants – the Puerto Ricans of New York, the Cubans of Miami, the Mexicans in El Paso, the Chinese of San Francisco, the Vietnamese in San Jose, the Hmong refugees in Denver, whichever huddled masses have most recently been crowding through the golden door – “Hispanic and other”, as the document puts it guardedly. Sociolinguist John Baugh tells me that indeed the organization originates with an anti-immigrant group that was told by their market research consultants that people didn’t get particularly steamed up about immigration,
but they *did* get steamed up about the English language. The support for
the English language issue started right there – a marketing decision by a
P.R. man for a group of bigots.

Horn’s document plays on the fears of the xenophobes, emphasizing
the “irresponsible” and “sneaky” behavior of the “radicals”, and the
“dangerous spread” of ideas that favor “people who can’t read or speak
English”. But the proposed amendment looks so reasonable when printed
up as House Joint Resolution number 96. Section 1 reads simply:

The English language shall be the official language of the United States.

How innocuous. And Section 2 merely forbids either the United States or
any State to require the use of another language for any purpose; Section
3 provides that this shall not prohibit laws requiring instruction in some
other language if it is “for the purpose of making students who use a
language other than English proficient in English” (English but not math
may be taught in Spanish, in other words); and Section 4 allows the
Congress and the States to enforce the above provisions by legislation.
Most people in the USA would probably be surprised that these pro-
posals are not part of the law already. How deceptive the proposed
Amendment is.

In all of its history, the United States has had English as its language
by custom, not by legal stipulation. Legal stipulations can be overturned
by plebiscites; customs are immune to such measures. No one has ever
previously suggested that the English-speaking character of the USA is a
matter for legislators to debate or determine. While other countries have
language policies set out in their constitutions, and regularly enjoy
language riots, the USA has never considered such a thing, and the
sovereignty of English has been the result.

Indeed, the rise of English across the entire world is utterly amazing.
At international academic meetings in Bonn or Bologna, in Tokyo or
Tbilisi, all papers are given in English. Japanese teenagers wear clothing
with English words (chosen at random) emblazoned on them, because the
look of written English is fashionable. Multi-national corporations in
Europe use English for all their business correspondence. India uses
English as one of its major official languages. Bantu schoolchildren
rioted in the streets in South Africa when it was proposed that they
should be offered bilingualism (in the guise of obligatory Afrikaans
classes); they wanted English. The world is just cuckoo bananas about
English. People learn it even if they are discouraged – and surely it is
easy to be discouraged from learning a language with a spelling system so
insane it makes the underlying representations in *The Sound Pattern of English* look sensible.

The plain fact is that making English the official language of the United States of America is about as urgently called for as making hotdogs the official food at baseball games.

Are the supporters of English First deaf and blind to such facts? I have no idea. But the marketing strategy they have chosen for their ideas is likely to work like a charm with electors, as California found out in a recent election. A well organized faction with aims related to those of English First put a proposition (i.e. a referendum measure) on the ballot that was to make English the official language of California, which it had never previously been. And despite a certain amount of opposition from groups who realized what this was really going to mean, it swept the board, 76% of the electors voting yes.

Now, for the first time in its history, California has a statement in its constitution that says English is its official language. Hitherto, it had just been a blindingly obvious and socially immutable fact. Now, it is enshrined in the fickle fabric of a referendum outcome. Some time early in the next century, California will find, given present demographic trends, that it has more Spanish speakers than English speakers. Given what has been done so far, it will be the Spanish speakers' right to call another referendum, this time to declare that Spanish is the official language of California. (And why not? It certainly was a mere 150 years ago.) I hope the English Firsters realize what they have done. The indisputably English-speaking character of California as a state has been reduced to a mere matter of law, and could be changed in a day. Yo soy learning to hablar Español (y trying to get the hang del code-switching).

Nor were the consequences of the vote in California merely symbolic. The first lawsuits to try and get State money pulled back from multilingual services to immigrants were filed within weeks of the election. The angry parent who telephoned a college Provost after a California graduation ceremony last year to complain about the minute or two that was in Spanish (many students being Chicanos) has a new option this year: he can sue the college for being out of compliance with the State constitution.

The English First organization, with its highly un-American hostility to immigrants (immigrants other than Anglos like me, of course), is bent on doing for the entire United States what has already been achieved in California and several other states. And an incredibly large percentage of the population, including lots of legislators and a curiously large number
of foreign immigrants, is with them to the hilt, apparently not understanding what is really going on.

As far as I can see, the only thing that can stop this wave of linguistic chauvinism, with its ugly political undertones, is a huge (and doubtless very costly) effort by those who know about the disadvantages of legally enforced language policies to get their side of the debate widely heard. And even then, the way things are going, they may lose, which will mean that the most powerful nation on earth will have, in a single decade, refused to affirm in its constitution the equal rights of women, but agreed to affirm (pointlessly but symbolically) the lack of equal rights accorded to its large non-English-speaking population. I hope the sociolinguists and applied linguists who have more specialized knowledge in this domain than I do will get a chance to be heard in the coming debate, and will seize it.

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Geoffrey K. Pullum

Cowell College
University of California
Santa Cruz CA 95064
U.S.A.

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