

Bill Piatt. ¿Only English? Law and language policy in the United States. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1990. Pp. xii + 199.

In 1986, California, noted for its multicultural population, made national news by passing a referendum declaring English the official language of the state. In 1988, Florida (another bastion of multilingualism) followed suit. To date, eighteen states have statutes, constitutional amendments, or resolutions indicating English as their official language. The great majority were enacted after 1981 when S.I. Hayakawa, then senator of California, introduced a bill amending the U.S. Constitution to designate English as the official language of the country. While unsuccessful, the proposal launched an organization known as U.S. English which is dedicated to waging battle against bilingual ballots and bilingual education and has sensationalistically brought language policy to the attention of the person in the street.

These efforts seem at first glance to be benign affirmations of the indisputable hegemony of the English language in U.S. society; however, there is actually a great deal more at stake. Bill Piatt's new book *¿Only English?* is a carefully researched account of the many historical, legal, political, and philosophical interests involved in the official language debate. Piatt, professor of law at Texas Tech University, cuts through the vitriol and diatribes to address squarely the real issues, i.e. 1) whether we have a right to express ourselves and receive communication in the language of our choice, and 2) how we can accommodate legitimate language interests while maintaining national cohesiveness.

Piatt makes it clear from the outset that his personal and professional experiences have convinced him that multilingualism and multiculturalism are advantageous to the

nation as a whole. His basic thesis is that the U.S. should institute limited official bilingualism in the interest of protecting the rights of all its citizens and preserving unity. Such a move would resolve the legal contradictions and ambiguities which plague present policy without endangering the ultimate supremacy of the English language.

Piatt's volume is divided into three parts. The first gives a historical overview of the recurrent language rights debate in the U.S. The second painstakingly considers the evolution of the contemporary legal parameters of language rights in the domains of education, work, the legal system, social services, and the broadcast media. The final segment evaluates the inconsistencies in the law and proposes a just solution. Each of the ten chapters is capped off by a bibliography of books, articles, and legal documents, and the book closes with a useful index of the legal cases covered.

The material is well-written and accessible to the educated layperson wishing to comprehend the complex legal foundation for language rights in U.S. society. The first chapter--"Historical perspective"--should be required reading for all those involved in public policy, education, and language planning. It successfully debunks the widespread myth that the U.S. is and always has been an English-monolingual nation. Piatt draws upon the work of Heath (1976) and others to show how American revolutionary leaders recognized the importance of multilingual communication to the struggle for independence and rejected early attempts to designate an official language as being contrary to the spirit of freedom which motivated the founding of the new republic.

Even more engrossing is his analysis of immigration laws and their conflict with the

basic ideological premises of the U.S. A particularly shameful incident recounted in this section is the rejection by the U.S. Congress in 1939 of a bill that would have authorized the rescue of 20,000 children from Nazi Germany on the grounds that such a move would exceed the national origin quotas set for that country. Ironically enough, when the immigration quotas were first established, it was the German immigrant who was cited as being the ideal U.S. citizen--hard-working, punctual, God-fearing, etc. However, jingoism, political expediency, and economic interests blinded the Congressmen, and the children were left to perish, despite the fact that American families were prepared to sponsor them.

A telling quote from Theodore Roosevelt on immigration sums up in a nutshell the ideology of the English-only movement today. Old Teddy asserted that: "We have room for but one language here and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house" (17-18). Piatt's coverage of the clash between the "English-only" and "English-plus" movements is perhaps the strongest part of his review. By placing the debate into historical perspective, he allows the reader to see how there is relatively little new in the claims of U.S. English and similar groups, aside from improved financing and organization. He also demonstrates how English-only legislation targets Hispanics (particularly the young, the old, and the poor) and responds to the fears of "mainstream" Americans as they confront the demographic boom in Hispanic birthrate and Spanish language maintenance efforts. In addition, Piatt includes the text of state legislation countering English-only measures, something one rarely sees in the press. Louisiana and New Mexico's resolutions defending cultural and language rights are

particularly newsworthy expressions of public sentiment that somehow did not make national headlines.

Part Two encompasses more than 100 pages and is the heart of the book. Here Piatt presents numerous legal cases in which language rights were at issue. While the literature on bilingualism is replete with legal analyses of language rights in schools and judicial settings (cf. Schneider 1976, Pousada 1979, Leibowitz 1982, Ovando and Collier 1985: 21-55), readers will find much that is new and revealing in the discussion of language in the workplace, social service agencies, and broadcast media. While the evidence is quite damning (I found myself exclaiming out loud as I read), Piatt manages to maintain a calm and non-accusatory tone throughout, which should go a long way toward convincing well-intentioned but confused advocates of English-only laws.

The volume ends with Piatt's proposal for an equitable language policy. This reader found his ideas to be quite sensible, although they have little likelihood of being approved by the current federal administration. In brief, Piatt rejects an English-only solution as overly simplistic and costly in the long run. Instead, he advocates a unified policy of accommodation that respects both minority and majority needs.

Under Piatt's plan, U.S. society would recognize limited official bilingualism in those situations where a non-English speaking individual would be denied access to basic human needs (e.g. the rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, plus the right to travel, vote, defend oneself in criminal proceedings, obtain food, shelter, education, etc.). While potentially expensive, this policy would be no more onerous and no less desirable than the protections presently accorded indigents in our society. Limited official English

monolingualism would be recognized in cases where ensuring the safety of persons or property calls for communication in one common language (e.g. traffic control, aviation, emergency communications, legitimate business needs, etc.). Finally, traditional freedom of choice would be adhered to in the remaining situations with legal remedies for infringements.

Piatt's book demands attention at this juncture. The growing economic "recession", the burgeoning language minority population, and the increasing need for effective communication with the changing world community make a reasoned approach to language policy a must. While the outlook for language rights in the U.S. is far from bleak since federal safeguards override any state legislation, nevertheless federal protection can only be invoked by those who are informed about their rights and have the time and/or money to litigate for them. Every state which jumps onto the English-only bandwagon represents another small step toward the approval of a federal constitutional amendment and another giant step away from the minority language protection tenets of the United Nations Charter and the Helsinki Accord which our nation ratified.

The only real flaw I find in Piatt's book is the lack of coverage of language rights in U.S. possessions like Puerto Rico and Guam where English was imposed as an official language. As a resident of Puerto Rico (which in 1991 reinstated Spanish as its sole official language), I am particularly concerned about the impact the English-only movement may have on the island. Any federal English-only law would run into strong (perhaps violent) resistance on the part of the Puerto Rican people who have since 1898 repeatedly insisted on their right to maintain their native language. This resistance would in turn have significant implications for the future political status of the island.

It is to be hoped that Piatt's work will serve to raise enough consciousness to divert thinking people from a narrow path that can only lead to more discrimination against minority groups, more resentment, and more divisiveness in our already polarized society. I strongly recommend this book to all those concerned with preserving and fortifying the United States' strongest asset--its cultural diversity.

#### REFERENCES

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