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**THOU SHALT SPEAK ENGLISH: ENGLISH IN CALIFORNIA ELECTIONS**

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**HUMANITIES WORKING PAPER 133**

August 1987



## THOU SHALT SPEAK ENGLISH: ENGLISH IN CALIFORNIA ELECTIONS\*

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper I present the results of a study of attitudes towards an issue of language policy in California. A proposition was put on the November 4, 1986 general election ballot to make English the official state language of California (called Proposition 63). As the pre-election polls indicated, the proposition passed, thus becoming law, by a vote of three-fourths of those voting. This issue is particularly sensitive in California, where the predictions are that by the year 2000 two-thirds of the population will be people whose native language is Spanish. In the weeks preceding the elections I distributed about twelve hundred questionnaires, to a community whose native language is predominantly English, which asked "Are you for or against the proposition to make English California's official language, and why?" Three hundred and one forms, or one-fourth, were returned, indicating a high interest in the issue. The results are two-thirds in favor, one-third opposed and only a handful undecided. The results are also analyzed with respect to the answers to "why," which were given by 80 percent of the respondents, and which could be grouped into some fairly clear categories. The main result is that which was hoped for: people feel very strongly about language.

\* This paper was presented at the XIVth International Congress of Linguistics, August 10-15, 1987, Berlin, East Germany (in Section 9 entitled *Sociolinguistics*). It will be published in *Proceedings of the XIVth International Congress of Linguists (held in Berlin/GDR, 1987)* Organized under the Auspices of CIPL in 1989.



## THOU SHALT SPEAK ENGLISH: ENGLISH IN CALIFORNIA ELECTIONS

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### I. BACKGROUND

#### A. General

Proposition 63, a state measure which was put on the November 4, 1986 general election ballot, read on the ballot: "Official State Language. Requires Legislature and State officials to insure English as official state common language. Provides for private enforcement. Fiscal Impact: No direct effect on the costs or revenues of the state or local governments." A "YES" and a "NO" circle were provided for voting, and the proposition was voted into law by a three-fourths majority.

#### B. Proponents and Opponents

This proposition, often referred to as the "English-only" measure, had its enthusaistic proponents, including the Washington-based national organization called U.S. English, whose honorary chairman, former senator S. I. Hayakawa, endorsed it and wrote on its behalf in the major Los Angeles area newspaper, the *Los Angeles Times*, as well as bitter opponents who also wrote in the same newspaper, with headlines such as "Prop. 63 Would Betray State's Future" and "Ugly or Polite, It's Racism." The *Times* itself made a recommendation, as is its usual policy at times of state and federal elections, and it was for a "no" vote. In its post-election editorial, the *Times* expressed the hope that the passage would not have much effect. It appears that so far, that hope was fulfilled, although it remains to be seen how the legislature will act on bilingual education.

#### C. Latino Position

One of the puzzles in the controversy was the position of Latino, or Hispanic voters, who appeared to support the measure (58 percent according to a *Los Angeles Times* poll). Support was quite evident among recent immigrants, especially first-generation Latino-Americans, whose parents were born in Spanish-speaking countries. (The same attitude was voiced in my survey.) What also seemed surprising was the great demand for English classes among recent immigrants.

#### D. This Study

To linguists such issues of language policy are of double interest, personal and professional, and the latter led me to distribute, with the help of students in my linguistics class, a relevant questionnaire. I made an attempt to reach as varied a population as possible (about forty geographical locations with differing interests) within a rather small community which I suspect however to be primarily English-speaking; the reason was mostly limited time.

## II. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The exact number of questionnaires which reached people is hard to determine, since more than one person was involved in the distribution of part of them, and typically I would leave a bunch at some location with one person with the request to reach as many people as possible. I am assuming the most positive, i.e., that all twelve hundred distributed actually reached potential respondents, and thus the three hundred and one questionnaires returned are taken to be *one-fourth*. This represents an extremely high response, and therefore the most significant result: the fact that people feel very strongly about the issue of language. Nothing new, but it is nice to have another confirmation.

Number Distributed	Number Returned	Percent Returned	FOR	Percent of Total	AGAINST	Percent of Total
1200	301	25	193	64.12	101	33.55

*Quantitative results, showing a return of 25 percent: those "For" representing approximately 64 percent and those "Against" 33.5 percent of the total.*

The number unaccounted for in the above results are questionnaires which were either marked explicitly as "Undecided" in some form, or unmarked. There were only 7 of those, or slightly over 2 percent.

### III. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

#### A. General

This is clearly the most interesting, and, fortunately, less difficult to analyze, part than anticipated. The vast majority of those responding "for" (165 out of 200, including the undecided for statistical ease, and since most had comments) expressed reasons -- a few in foreign languages and even scripts I could not read; about the same (81 out of 101) of those "against." Comments ranged from a full typed page to an unfinished line. It is very tempting to quote some, but since strict anonymity was requested (a few were signed, nevertheless), some generalized categories and notes will have to suffice. The presence of comments, however, underscores the main finding that the issue of language is something people feel strongly about. In general, the comments were well-thought out and clear, though some were explosive, some quite strongly worded, and a few even challenged me personally.

#### B. Comments "For"

The categories found among the "For" responses are discussed first, simply because there were more of them. More than one-third of these give this reason, in several cases verbatim: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." The emphasis here is on the fact that this is the U.S.A. Some most strongly worded, explosive and even ethnically abusive remarks were found in this general category. The second largest category, representing about one-fourth of the respondents, can be characterized in such terms as "better communication," "melting-pot," "national unity," "togetherness." A few hard to classify responses such as asserting that English is an easy to learn language were included here. A handful who cited English as being the language of literature and higher education (surprisingly few in my opinion) were likewise included here. The next most prominent category are those opposed to a bilingual society, mostly citing Canada and/or Belgium. Interestingly, some Spanish-background voices are in this group. A few respondents consider it rude to be spoken to directly in a foreign language, or having one spoken in their presence. A couple of people are for the measure to prevent employment discrimination, and a couple are against it for the same reason. A few were in languages beyond my competence, but all marked "For." A few were simply beyond classification, such as "I speak Spanish," written in Spanish, and "I'm a foreigner," in English. These were unmarked, thus being "undecided." The other five were explicit about their indecision.

#### C. Comments "Against"

Those against the measure quoted its racist character to form the largest category (about one-fourth), and the desirability of linguistic diversity in the second largest (about one-sixth). A few regarded it a poor law, a few were concerned about the possibility of law

suits. A few people considered it unnecessary since English is de facto the official language, a few not specific enough or downright stupid. And concern was voiced that false hopes will be raised by it as well as for the weakness of culture which needs such defensive measures, and the need to make the transition into culture easier. One impossible to classify response urged us all to speak Algonquin.

#### **D. Conclusions**

The results of this study are very satisfying to me personally, since once again it could be ascertained how strongly people feel about the issue of language. The large number of responses to the questionnaire itself and the very large numbers of comments, both for and against, make this very clear. The comments on the respondents' attitudes make fascinating reading, revealing both depth of reasoning and emotions. It was not the aim of this study to characterize a certain social agglomerate nor to predict the outcome of the issue at hand.

Linguists are well aware of the complexity of issues such as this one. The prediction that place California's population in the year 2000 at levels of two-thirds of people whose native language will be Spanish, and the influx of immigrants with other language backgrounds certainly point to the possibility of language problems. One encounters those daily in press accounts of people, for example, demanding a native English-speaking doctor. These are serious issues. The hostility of a large segment of the population towards immigrants cannot be overlooked, any more than the desire of the immigrants to learn English while maintaining cultural plurality. Legislating language is, of course, another matter. History, in terms of Polish, for instance, which survived almost two centuries of political non-existence of the country, tells us something about the tenacity of language. The miserable experience of language wars cannot be overlooked either.

I do not hold a crystal ball with California's future in it, but my feeling is that English is very likely to be the official language, no matter what the legislature does, mostly because both native speakers and immigrants find that to be the desirable way. But the future is not ours to see. There is a curious language fashion in California catching on in various walks of life: students, service people, and journalists insert Spanish words here and there, much as it was (still is) in some circles to insert French and Latin words. I do not expect President Reagan to follow it, but who can tell about his successor? We are certainly living in times when the power of the so-called media, press and television primarily, can hardly be overestimated. We are certainly living in interesting times. *Qué será, será.*

## APPENDIX

## A SYNOPTIC VIEW

## BACKGROUND

Proposition to make English the official state language of California.

## PROPOSITION 63: November 4, 1986

## California General Election

*OFFICIAL STATE LANGUAGE: Requires Legislature and State officials to ensure English as official state common language. Provides for private enforcement. Fiscal Impact: No direct effect on the costs of the state or local governments.*

## PROPOSERS

U.S. ENGLISH (Senator S. I. Hayakawa: Honorary Chairman)

"We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union . . ."

-- *letterhead*

National Survey:

"Should English be designated the official language of the United States?"

-- from the *Los Angeles Times*:

Senator S. I. Hayakawa, "A Common Language, So All Can Pursue Common Goals"

"Bilingual and bicultural societies already exist in Canada, Belgium, South Africa, Sri Lanka and other areas of the world. The results have ranged from disharmony to bloody strife. . . ."

"In Canada, for example, it costs that nation's taxpayers 25 cents per word to translate government documents . . ."; Tamils against Sinhalese speakers in Sri Lanka; "common language . . . enables us to resolve differences, cooperate, understand and respect. . . ."

"Generations of immigrants have applied themselves to learning English to 'become Americans' and 'get ahead.'"

**OPPONENTS**

Position of Spanish-speaking communities

-- from the *Los Angeles Times*:

"Prop. 63 Would Betray State's Future"

-- Richard Rodriguez

"Ugly or Polite, It's Racism"

-- Frank del Olmo

The *Los Angeles Times* recommendation of "No" vote, November 2 and 4

**POSITION OF SPANISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES**

-- comments from *Los Angeles Times*:

"Latino backing of 'English-Only' a puzzle" (58 percent of likely Latino voters)

"Many supporters also favor bilingual education, ballots"

"This is America, they should learn English" -- a San Fernando Valley woman whose mother was born in Mexico

**EFFECT SO FAR**

-- *Los Angeles Times* editorial on November 7, 1987:

"Voter enactment of Proposition 63 . . . must not blind Californians to the reality of their multilingual state. . . . U.S. Supreme Court decisions mandate bilingual education. . . . Multi-lingual ballots and voting materials are required by federal voting-rights laws. English is the language of the land, because people find it practical, necessary and, eventually, comfortable."

-- *Los Angeles Times* editorial on July 17, 1987:

"A better chance to learn. . . ."

State guidelines on bilingual education expired last month; legislature to extend them to 1992 endorsed.

"Students should keep pace with academic subjects in their first language while studying English for two to three years."

## ANALYSIS OF COMMENTS

### QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

(Showing a return of 25 percent: those "For" representing approximately 64 percent and those "Against" 33.5 percent of the total)

Number Distributed	Number Returned	Percent Returned	FOR	Percent of Total	AGAINST	Percent of Total
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COMMENTS: 80 percent of total respondents

165 out of 200 "FOR" (includes 7 "undecided")

81 out of 101 "AGAINST"

COMMENTS: AGAINST

1/4 Racist character

1/6 Linguistic rainbow

Other Lawsuits  
Unnecessary

COMMENTS: FOR

1/3 "When in Rome do as the Romans do"

1/4 "Melting Pot"

Other Opposed to bilingual society  
(e.g., Canada, Belgium)

## CONCLUSIONS

Two-thirds of California's population to be Spanish-speaking by year 2000

Influx of other immigrants

Tenacity of language

Spanish words as fashion

Qué será, será