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## Debate over English about more than words

Cultural fears, search for national identity seen at heart of language bills

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NEW YORK - It's been 30 years, but Dick Tucker has no trouble recalling the French signs posted inside city buses that crisscrossed Montreal: "In French, we say it this way. We don't say it that way."

Language is the words to the lullabies we were sung as babies, the fabric of our conversation around the dinner table, the whisper of prayer, the lessons of school. It clearly evokes strong feelings, framing not just our speech, but our thoughts.

As U.S. lawmakers renew the long-standing debate over whether to make English the nation's official language, those bus placards make clear that Americans are hardly the first to stare into the sometimes troubling mirror of linguistic self-image.

### 'Language is never about language'

And just as in many other countries where people worry about protecting the mother tongue — ironically, often from the global spread of English — the debate here over whether English is endangered is largely about all sorts of matters that have little to do with the words we speak.

"Language is never about language," said Walt Wolfram, a social linguist at North Carolina State University. "Why should it be any different in the United States?"

That point is seconded by Tucker, an expert on language education, planning and policy at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University.

"The discussion is ... related to fears of immigration issues. I think it's related to a worry about the changing demography of the United States. I think it's a worry about who will continue to have political and economic influence," Tucker said.

### Debate from the start

That debate has recycled on and off for years. While the current push to declare English's primacy is relatively new — this past week, the Senate passed two measures, one declaring English the national's official language and the other its "common and unifying" tongue — the notion of protecting the language has been kicked around almost since the nation's founding.

As president, John Adams lobbied in 1780 for the creation of a national academy to refine, correct and improve the English language. Adams' proposal died, thanks to some lawmakers who saw it as a Royalist attempt to define personal behavior.

But the idea of recognizing the special status of English lived on.

Making English the nation's official language won wide support during and after World War I, when German-speaking immigrants constituted the nation's largest minority.

That era saw many of the accommodations that long been accorded to immigrants — including bilingual education — shelved, said James Crawford, author of "At War With Diversity: U.S. Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety."

### **Renewed push for primacy**

The tide shifted in the 1960s, as immigration laws were relaxed. But opposition to bilingual education, which had resumed, swelled again in the late 1970s with concerns that immigrants were not learning English fast enough.

That rekindled interest in English as an official language, a campaign made official with California Sen. S.I. Hayakawa's introduction in 1981 of the first bill ever introduced in Congress seeking such a change. In 1983, Hayakawa founded U.S. English, the group that is still a primary mover behind efforts to assert a national language.

Still, the debate over language here has been tame.

"Language conflict is something that we've really largely avoided in contrast to many other countries," Crawford said. "English has been such a dominant force that assimilation has been very rapid."

### **International dilemma**

Elsewhere, however, language has often stirred very strong feelings.

Some 158 nations have included a specific measure in their constitutions promulgating one or more national languages, according to a survey by Eduardo Faingold, a professor at the University of Tulsa. The United States is one of the relatively few without such a measure.

Language has been the source of bitterness in countries like South Africa, where the imposed teaching of Afrikaans to black South Africans was closely associated with apartheid.

Some nation's policing of language has gone far beyond the verbiage in their constitution.

France's Academie Francaise is both admired and ridiculed for its dedication to protecting the "langue de la nation" from words borrowed from other tongues — particularly English.

Canadian lawmakers have labored to make clear that theirs is a bilingual nation, ensuring that everything from cereal boxes to highway signs are written in both French and English. Except, that is, in the predominantly French-speaking province of Quebec, where English has been eliminated from most officially sanctioned language.

In Israel, the Academy of the Hebrew Language creates new Hebrew words and rules on spelling and grammar. In Iceland, the government established the Islensk Malstod, a national institute that considers and crafts the new words needed to sustain a language that has changed little in nearly 1,000 years.

### **Treasure or inconvenience?**

That goal has become increasingly important as a means to keep up as English has spread globally, asserting itself into business, science and other fields that depend on a living, up-to-date language, said Ari Pall Kristinsson, the director of the institute. He spoke — in English — by telephone from Reykjavik.

"(Icelandic) has a long history as a language and that's generally regarded as some sort of treasure that you should take care of," he said.

Then again, most Icelanders also speak some English, which gives them something in common with people in many countries, whose lives have long involved speaking and being comfortable with languages other than their own.

That might help explain the antagonism that language can stir in the United States, where most people do not speak a second language and experts say many remain uncomfortable hearing the unknown used

around them.

### **Hard to change behavior**

But the recurring debate over English is almost certainly about more than that, Wolfram and others say. The emotions surrounding language resurface less because of the comfort people feel with English than with the discomfort many Americans feel with everything that the influx of new languages represents.

A law establishing English as the official language might be largely symbolic. Or it could lead governments to restrict services it provides in other languages.

But could such a law change reality? In France, despite the best efforts of the Academie Francaise to root out Franglais, people still talk about their plans for "le weekend."

And consider all those commercials in Spanish, a regular feature now on American airwaves. Businesses realize the value of speaking to people in whatever language makes them most comfortable — and Crawford says that is something Americans will have to make peace with.

"It's never about the language," Wolfram said. "It's always about the cultural behaviors that are symbolically represented by language. That's what scares us."

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