

Is English safe?

Dennis Baron, University of Illinois

English is the language of choice for international commerce, science and technology, the internet, and rock 'n' roll, not to mention the T-shirt you may be wearing. As English spreads in Europe and around the globe, some critics wonder whether its new users are changing the language so much that it no longer resembles the original version. And some critics wonder as well whether English is even safe from those who have been speaking the “original version” for generations, since they too seem bent on perverting the course of the language with their tweets, texts, and Facebook posts. But here's a counternarrative to consider: there is no traceable, definitive, original version of English, and there is no group of English users, past or present, who can claim permanent ownership of this much-contested language. We speak of English as if it were one thing, but in practice we know as well that there are many Englishes with many different functions. This has always been the case. And in case you're live-Tweeting the conference, here's another 35 characters for you: the internet is not ruining English.

The success of English around the world poses both an opportunity and a threat. Knowledge of English seems necessary for competition on the world stage, so schools frequently require English, and more and more adults seek to add English to their résumés. But global English also becomes a form of cultural imperialism and linguistic colonialism, prompting protectionist measures. There are commissions to purge borrowed terms from the national language—and by borrowed terms I mean *English* ones—or laws requiring the national language in official interactions as well as in advertising,

broadcasting, and cultural expression. Complicating matters further, speakers from what I'll call the anglophone homelands are increasingly reluctant to yield control of the language they regard as their property, their "original version," both as it is used by minorities inside their borders and as it spreads abroad.

It's a paradox that, just as English offers a complex of promise and threat abroad, many in anglophone nations like the US and the UK think English at home is in danger: today's xenophobes—I call them the new nativists—warn that English is seriously losing ground to immigrant tongues like Spanish, or to supporters of local languages like Welsh; that attention to such languages impinges on the rights of English speakers; and purists add to this the charge that English is being destroyed by its own speakers, most of whom cannot be trusted to put two words together without breaching some hallowed rule of usage.

This sense that English isn't safe prompts measures requiring immigrants to master English before entering the country, before taking a job, or before they become citizens. In addition, we see a redoubling of efforts to make English the official language of legislatures, courts, government agencies, and schools, or to restrict the use of "foreign" languages. And there are continual calls for teaching, correcting, and testing the language of long-time English speakers and those just learning the language, to make sure that they meet a set of standards which everyone agrees must exist—it's just that not everyone shares the same list of what those standards are.

Let me start with a spoiler alert: Barring nuclear disasters, errant meteors, or the zombie apocalypse, English is safe.

Now that we've got that out of the way, we can consider these more interesting questions:

1. Who owns this new, global English? Who gets to say what's good and bad English? Who gets to say what even *counts* as English?
2. And, paradoxically, if English is so successful abroad, why do so many find it threatened at home, both from immigrants and from native speakers intent on doing the language great bodily harm?

The question of the rights to English turns out to be a question of political, social, and economic control masquerading as culture and tradition. And it concerns not just exported varieties of English, but domestic or internal ones as well.

English abroad



yeswewant.jpg

Here's a recent example where the ownership of English was contested. In 2010, "Yes we want," the slogan for a €1.8 million advertising campaign for bilingual English-Spanish high schools in Madrid, drew ridicule because "Yes, we want" was perceived to be bad English. As one translator sniffed, "Any of the students in these schools would be suspended if they repeated this slogan on a test." But a representative of the Ministry of

Education insisted that “Yes, we want” was not a test item, but a “creative publicity slogan, one of the best in recent years.” The Madrid dispute reminds us that now that English has gone global, it’s taking on a life of its own, not just in former British colonies but also in historically non-English-speaking countries, and the question of correctness is taking on a new spin. “Yes, we want” piggybacks on Barack Obama’s campaign slogan, “Yes, we can.” But is it really bad English, new English, or just another creative, language-distorting, remarkably attention-getting advertising slogan?

The proliferation of non-idiomatic English in international settings is hardly new. I once met a French English teacher who believed that “number phone” was the proper way to say what I mistakenly called a *phone number*. *Number phone* calqued the French idiom, *numéro de téléphone*, so it is logically preferable. *Phone number* might be “O.K.” in American English, but this teacher had been to England and knew that the Queen said “number phone,” and that’s the form she expected her students to learn. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *phone number* first appears in 1911, in a London publication, which suggests that it’s not an Americanism.

Speaking of Americanisms, the word *Americanism* was actually coined in 1781 by John Witherspoon, a Scot who had relocated to New Jersey and became the first president of Princeton University.

1. The first class I call Americanisms, by which I understand an use of phrases or terms, or a construction of sentences, even among persons of rank and education, different from the use of the same terms or phrases, or the construction of similar sentences, in Great-Britain.

americanism1.jpg

Witherspoon called *Americanisms* “phrases or terms, or a construction of sentences, even among persons of rank and education, different from the use of the same . . . in Great Britain.” He meant *Americanism* to be neutral. Maybe so, but he based his coinage on *Scotticism*, which had been an insult for a hundred years.

Witherspoon acknowledged that “the Scottish manner of speaking came to be considered as provincial barbarism; which, therefore, all scholars are now at the utmost pains to avoid.” But he suggested that America would become a center for its own brand of English, since unlike Scotland, it was not physically attached to England:

But by the removal of the court to London, and especially by the union of the two kingdoms, the Scottish manner of speaking came to be considered as provincial barbarism; which, therefore, all scholars are now at the utmost pains to avoid. It is very probable that the reverse of this, or rather its counter part, will happen in America. Being entirely separated from Britain, we shall find some centre or standard of our own, and not be subject to the inhabitants of that island, either in receiving new ways of speaking, or rejecting the old.

Being entirely separated from Britain, we shall find some centre or standard of our own, and not be subject to the inhabitants of that island, either in receiving new ways of speaking, or rejecting the old.

it has occurred to me to make some observations upon the present state of the English language in America, and to attempt a collection of some of the chief improprieties which prevail, and might be easily corrected.

But while Witherspoon waited for American language standards to develop, he found many Americanisms—errors and “improprieties”—to complain about “which prevail, and might be easily corrected.”

Witherspoon’s distaste for Americanisms began a tradition lately reaffirmed when the British commentator Matthew Engel published an anti-Americanism screed in the BBC’s online magazine. After circumspect readers pointed out that many of the “mistakes” Engel singled out were actually Briticisms, Engel reaffirmed his warning that England was heading toward “51st statehood,” and he counseled his fellow countrymen to maintain “the integrity of our own gloriously nuanced, subtle and supple version—the original version—of the English language.”

Witherspoon cites as an Americanism the annoying New World penchant for using *mad* for ‘angry,’ instead of its authentic, supple, and original British meaning, ‘bonkers, off the hook,’ or just plain ‘mental.’ Unfortunately the *OED* finds citations for *mad* as ‘angry’ going back to 1400—it even appears in the *Authorized Version*.

Engel’s phrase, “the original version,” reminds us again of the sense of ownership some people feel about a language being usurped by upstart Americans, not to mention the Spanish. But the very existence of “yes we can” is one more sign that English is no longer the exclusive property of traditional speakers and their dictionaries and grammars. The ancient Romans may have felt a similar loss of linguistic control as Latin started its long decline into Italian and the other romance languages. For now it doesn’t look like English is breaking up the way Latin did. But it could. As the Queen might put it, it’s early days yet, which is a Bricism first used by Thomas More in 1534, for “it’s too soon to tell.”



onparleenglish.jpg

While much of the world has joined Spain in chanting, “What do we want? English! When do we want it? Now!” some governments react to global English by passing laws to prop up their own national languages. And that of course is what lies behind the cover illustration for the March 22 issue of *L'Actualité*, with its scare headline about threats to French in Montréal, “Ici on parle English.”

But it’s not just the French setting up protectionist alarms. The Slovak Republic has beefed up its post-Soviet era language laws, to speed the demise of Russian and block the advance of English in its place, but also as a tool for suppressing other indigenous and immigrant languages. An English guest on a Slovak talk show had trouble understanding a caller’s question in Slovak, so the host translated the query into English. The guest also speaks Slovak, but he automatically responded to the English translation with an answer in English, violating the Slovak official language law that requires only Slovak in public. A listener complained, and the government quickly launched an investigation for “misusing the language,” punishable by a €5,000 fine. While English is taught in almost every Slovak school, the government doesn’t want English on the air.

In a similar move to combat the English juggernaut, the Chinese government banned English abbreviations on TV: GDP (gross domestic product), CPI (consumer price index) and NBA (National Basketball Association) to protect the purity of Chinese. Circumspect Chinese scholars pointed out that Chinese was never pure, that many ancient Chinese words come from Sanskrit, many recent ones from Japanese. Not to mention that, as in Spain, Slovakia, and France, English is the most widely studied foreign language in China.

English at home

Meanwhile, back home, some English speakers actually fear that, despite its global status, their language is threatened from within by other languages. Anglophones think that making English official will protect it, though, for example, with 92% of Americans speaking only English, and the rest learning it as fast as they can, it's not clear what protection the global language needs.

Unfortunately there's no dearth of measures to protect English. In the United States these take the form of laws making English the official language of government or schools, or policies making English the official language of a workplace.

Here are only a few examples:



First. English should and must be the only medium of instruction in public, private, denominational or other similar schools.

Second. Conversation in public places, on trains and over the telephone should be in the English language.

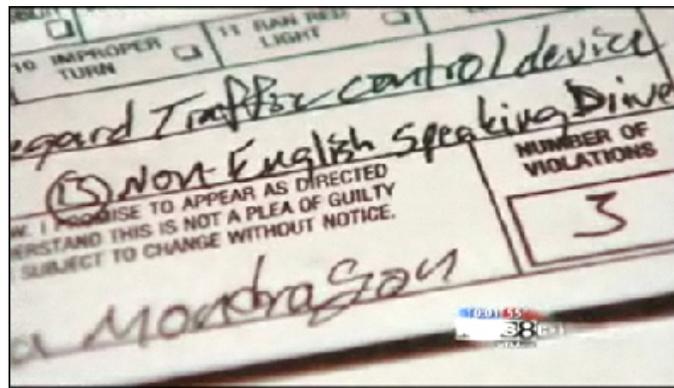
Third. All public addresses should and must be in the English language.

Fourth. Let those who cannot speak or understand the English language conduct their religious worship in their homes.

babel.jpg

- German was an early target of America's language nativists. In 1918, after the US entered World War I, Iowa governor William Harding issued the Babel Proclamation, banning foreign languages in public, on the train, and on the telephone—it was a very public communication device at the time. Harding banned foreign languages in religious services as well. In defending his order, Harding told the *New York Times*, “There is no use in anyone wasting his time praying in other languages than English. God is listening only to the English tongue.”
- The new American nativists now go after Spanish. A Texas judge ordered a bilingual woman to speak only English to her six-year old daughter or he would award custody of the child to the woman's ex-husband. The judge explained that by speaking Spanish to her daughter, “You're abusing that child and you're relegating her to the position of a housemaid.” When a public outcry arose, the

- judge publicly apologized, to housemaids, but he let his English-only order stand.
- A Pennsylvania judge sentenced three Spanish-speaking men convicted of robbery to learn English. If after a year of probation and language lessons they failed an English test, they'd go directly to jail.
 - The state of Arizona requires all public officials to speak English on the job. Even though the law doesn't specify how much English these workers need to know, or how to measure it, a candidate running for city council in the border town of San Luis was struck from the ballot because a local judge determined that she didn't know enough English to fulfill her duties.



dallastix.jpg

- From 2006-2009 Dallas, Texas, police issued tickets for “non-English speaking driver,” a violation which carried a \$204 fine. Only it turns out that “driving while Spanish” is not against the law. During that time, at least six different police officers issued at least 39 tickets for the nonexistent offense, and now the city had to track down the offenders to clean up their driving records and return their

money.

- New Mexico is called New Mexico because it was once part of Spanish-speaking Mexico. A motel owner fired the Hispanic staff in the Taos, New Mexico, hotel he'd just bought and offered to rehire them if they agreed to speak only English and change their Spanish-sounding names to English ones. To win his job back, one employee named Marco had to replace his "Hi, I'm Marco" name tag with one that reads, "Hi, I'm Mark."
- A middle school student in Wisconsin was punished for telling a friend how to say "I love you" in her native Menominee. Two New York City councilmen want to fine store owners who violate the city's law requiring business signs only in English. And a Montana state prison recently abandoned a policy that returned letters sent to prisoners that were not written in English.



baronsguide.jpg

In the past few years, more than 70 American towns and cities have considered or passed laws making English official. Some of these have significant immigrant populations, but many, like tiny, white bread Bogota, New Jersey, or entire states like

Iowa and West Virginia, do not. It may not be long before we'll need a Michelin guide to America's English-only towns and cities.



iowaplate.jpg

At the federal level, there's the bill introduced annually into the U.S. House of Representatives by Iowa representative Steve King. It's known sometimes as the "English Language Unity Act," sometimes more tellingly as the "Defense of English Act." H.R. 997 would make English the official language of the United States.

American conservatives support official English because they believe in a one nation/one language concept of unity, where language is the social glue holding together a diverse population, although speaking one language didn't keep the 13 colonies from breaking their connection with England, and it didn't do anything to hold the Union together in 1861, when the American Civil War began.

Conservatives also believe that no one can understand America's founding documents—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Gettysburg address, the national anthem—unless they read them in their original English version, though these same official English fans have no problem understanding their own sacred religious texts in translation. God, for them, is only listening to the English tongue.

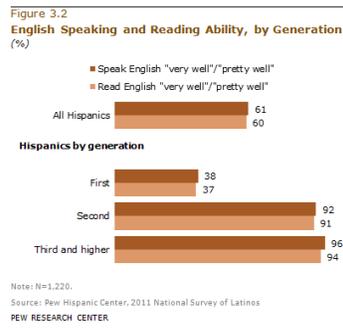
Conservatives believe that government should stay out of people's lives, but they have no qualms about telling people what language they should be speaking. But mainly supporters of official English believe that not speaking English is *prima facie* evidence that you're an illegal immigrant who swam across the Rio Grande, the river separating the US from Mexico. They've forgotten that English itself is an immigrant language, not just in America, where it clambered ashore "without papers" along with the pilgrims and the Virginia colonists in the early 1600s, but also in England, where it swam the North Sea with marauding Angles and Saxons in the 5th century, CE. These English-speaking illegals eventually gave us not just an official version of English, but also government-run health care, something American conservatives can't bring themselves to say in any language.

The English Language Unity Act requires English for all official government actions, from the laws, which are already in English, to everything that the government does that is "subject to scrutiny by either the press or the public" — that includes committee reports, hearings, and press briefings, as well as the inappropriate text messages that some members of Congress routinely expose to the scrutiny of the press and the public. In fact it would cover pretty much everything the American government does except spying and the actions of the Internal Revenue Service, though that's not a problem because no US government agency has the capability to spy or audit in any language but English anyway.

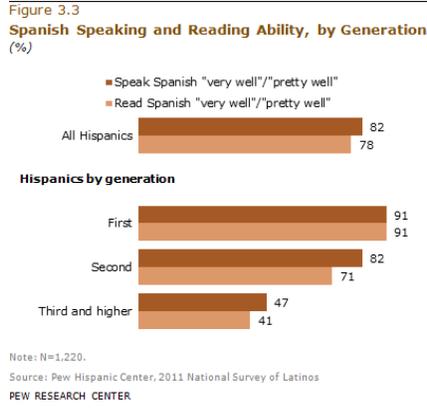
What gives teeth to the English Language Unity Act is its provision for citizens to sue the government: "A person injured by a violation . . . may in a civil action . . . obtain appropriate relief." It's not clear that anyone in the US has ever been injured for speaking

English to a government employee. Nor is it easy to imagine that anyone has ever been injured by a government employee who did *not* speak English (waterboarding is OK so long as it's done in English). But it's comforting to know that if this ever does happen, H.R. 997 gives you what's called a private right of action, you can take the government to court.

The proposed Defense of English Act is a defense against Spanish in the United States. But does English need such protection? The late Samuel P. Huntington argued that unlike previous immigrant groups, Spanish-speaking immigrants stick to Spanish and don't learn English. But according to new survey data from the Pew Hispanic Center, the use of Spanish typically declines across generations, just as it did with earlier groups of immigrants, and although 47% of third-generation Hispanics retain some Spanish, 70% of them are English-dominant bilinguals and 94-96% [report](#) they speak and read English well.



spanishdata.png



spanishdata2.png

This kind of protectionism is hardly limited to the United States. The anti-Welsh-language website glasnost.org.uk (—glasnost? really?), which claims to support human rights, but uses language reminiscent of the Defense of English Act, insists that laws promoting and protecting Welsh in Wales are injurious to English speakers: “Where in the UK are you singled out by most of the public bodies as unemployable on the grounds that the only language you can speak and use is English?” In 2010 the UK added an English language requirement to its immigration policies, and Canada’s Minister of Immigration just announced that immigrants seeking low- or semi-skilled jobs in Canada will have to demonstrate proficiency in English or French before they will be allowed to enter the country. We have to ask, to what extent do such language requirements send the message, “it’s not the language we don’t want here, it’s the people who speak the language”?

Conclusion

On the question *Who owns global English?*: the answer is, its speakers do. Whoever they are. Wherever they happen to be. Whatever their fluency. And that means those who

think they have a better right to determine what's standard must relax a power which they claim to have on paper, but which they seldom possess in practice.

On the question of protectionism: it's a natural linguistic process that results from language contact, but in the end that will probably do little to alter the linguistic outcomes of such contact. Even with reports of bilingualism in third-generation American Hispanics, English shows no sign of losing its status as *de facto* language of choice in the US. And despite laws limiting the public use of English in France or Slovakia, English shows no sign of losing its status either as a global language or as a vital auxiliary language in Europe—for now.

The assertion of ownership and measures defending majority languages against the imagined incursion of minority local and immigrant languages should remind us that in multilingual situations, power and paranoia frequently displace rational discourse and common sense. There is no real danger to English. Although continuing immigration may give the impression that nonanglophone islands are developing in traditionally English-speaking areas, immigrants are acquiring English, though such acquisition will surely take longer than the self-styled defenders of English would like.

Finally, as we consider the advantages and disadvantages of the spread of English, we'd do well to remember that English may not always be the world language that it is today. Shifts in the political and economic landscape have always impacted the language of wider communication, and English may ultimately find itself going the way of Latin. I like to champion the linguistic underdog, and so if we held a vote for the next world language, I'd choose one of the little languages, say Finnish, or Hawaiian (I prefer Hawaii's climate). But for now, our task must be to reassure those in the anglophone

homelands that English remains the target language of newcomers, and that it's not dangerous to protect the language rights of minorities. They must also realize that the language does not belong to an inner core of long-term anglophones, that English abroad belongs to its users abroad, even as they both embrace English and fear the consequences of its dominance.