

EPIC FAIL? THE BIRTH AND DECLINE OF THE “ENGLISH PLUS” MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract: Coca-Cola’s 2014 Super Bowl commercial seems to have reignited the frequently fierce debate concerning the nature of American identity in general and the societal acceptability of growing linguistic diversity in particular. The multilingual version of the patriotic song “America the Beautiful” triggered immediate outrage (and to a lesser degree drew praise as well) especially on Facebook and Twitter – USA Today even posed the rhetorical question “Can you believe this reaction?” shortly after the event (Lee, 2014).

This paper argues that the controversial reception of the song was nothing out of the ordinary: at least since the 1980s the assimilationist interpretation of American identity has been gaining ground as evidenced by the attacks against the strong forms of bilingual education and by the mounting support behind the Official English movement – simultaneously with the gradual decline of the multiculturalist, first-language maintenance-oriented “English Plus” alternative, promoted under the aegis of the English Plus Information Clearinghouse (EPIC) since 1987.

The analysis focuses on those federal-level legislative attempts of the 1990s that tried to establish “English Plus” as a viable challenger to Official English (often stigmatized as “English-only”). There were eleven resolutions (plus one bill) introduced in Congress between 1995 and 2011 which expressly endorsed “English Plus” but none had been reported out of committee.

Nevertheless, the changing text of the House and Senate versions – coupled with the fluctuating and eventually disappearing partisan support behind the proposals – is yet another indicator of a major shift in American language ideology, with far-reaching ramifications that further signal the demise of the language-as-resource interpretation of linguistic diversity in the United States.

Key words: “English Plus”; multilingualism; legislation; federal congress; United States.

1. Introduction

Coca-Cola’s 2014 Super Bowl commercial seems to have reignited the frequently fierce debate concerning the nature of American identity in general and the societal

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acceptability of growing linguistic diversity in particular. The multilingual version of the patriotic song “America the Beautiful” triggered immediate outrage (and to a lesser degree drew praise as well) especially on Facebook and Twitter (see e.g. “Coca-Cola ‘America the Beautiful’ Super Bowl Ad Celebrates Diversity, Twitter Explodes,” 2014).

USA Today even posed the rhetorical question “Can you believe this reaction?” shortly after the event (Lee, 2014).

This paper argues that the controversial reception of the song was nothing out of the ordinary: at least since the 1980s the assimilationist interpretation of American identity has been gaining ground as evidenced by the attacks against the strong forms of bilingual education and by the mounting support behind the Official English movement – simultaneously with the gradual decline of the multiculturalist, first-language maintenance-oriented “English Plus” alternative, promoted under the aegis of the (now defunct) English Plus Information Clearinghouse (EPIC) since 1987.

The present analysis focuses on those federal-level legislative attempts of the 1990s – beginning in 1995 – which tried to establish “English Plus” as a viable challenger to Official English (often stigmatized as “English-only”).

Besides comparing the language-related perceptions, perspectives, and policy proposals in the “English Plus” resolutions, the paper also charts the shifting support behind the “English Plus” resolutions in the House and the Senate over time.

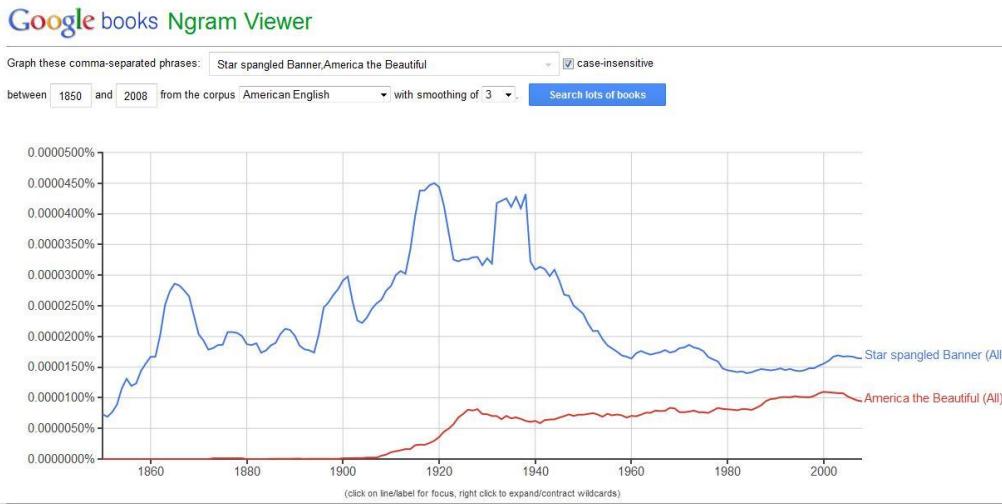
2. “America the Beautiful” and its Author: Patriotism and Diversity in Harmony?

Frequently regarded as the unofficial national anthem of the United States, the poem “America the Beautiful” was written in 1893 by Katharine Lee Bates, professor of English literature at Wellesley College, inspired by a train journey from Massachusetts to Colorado Springs and a subsequent wagon and mule trek up to Pike’s Peak.

As the Google Ngram Viewer graph shows, the relative frequencies of the phrase “America the Beautiful” have been closing in on those of the “Star-spangled Banner” in books published in the United States at least since the 1960s, indicating the growing popularity of the song (and the poem) more than a century after its birth (Google Books Ngram Viewer):

Czeglédi, S. (2015). EPIC fail? The birth and decline of the “English Plus” movement in the United States. *Topos* 4(1), 81-96.

Graph 1. “Star-spangled Banner” vs. “America the Beautiful” in the Google Books database



The poem was first published in the weekly journal *Congregationalist*, (in July 1895); then a revised version appeared in the *Boston Evening Transcript* (on November 19, 1904); finally, an expanded version came out in 1913 (“Katharine Lee Bates,” 2014).

The tune was composed separately (and more than ten years earlier) for a 17th century hymn by church organist and choirmaster Samuel A. Ward. Ward's music was combined with the poem as late as in 1910, seven years after the composer's death (“America the Beautiful,” 2015).

Contrary to simplistic expectations based on the overflowing patriotism of “America the Beautiful”, the author of the poem does not quite fit the stereotypical image of an all-American, emblematic patriot: in addition to being a woman (a clear disadvantage 120 years ago), Bates was also a “lesbian Socialist” (Dreier, 2014), who turned her back on the Republican Party after they had scuttled the global implementation of Woodrow Wilson’s idealist principles in the wake of World War I (see e.g. “Republican Women Declare for Davis,” 1924, p. 2).

In addition, Katharine Bates must have been proficient in Spanish as well (at least at the level of reading comprehension), since the 1911 edition of “America the Beautiful and Other Poems” contained more than 50 pages of translated folk songs from that language (Bates, 1911, pp. 251-305).

Yet it was language, more precisely the use “foreign” languages (as well as indigenous and old colonial tongues), e.g. Spanish, Keres Pueblo, Tagalog, Hindi,

Czeglédi, S. (2015). EPIC fail? The birth and decline of the “English Plus” movement in the United States. *Topos* 4(1), 81-96.

Senegalese French, and Hebrew besides English (Zimmer, 2014) that triggered the nativist verbal and written attacks on the 60-second Super Bowl commercial.

Since the “ad positioned itself on a crucial fault line in America’s culture wars between tradition, myth and modernity” (Younge, 2014), the backlash had clearly been foreseeable and was probably calculated in order to maximize the marketing effect of the piece. (The split-second allusion to gay dads in the Coke commercial practically went unnoticed by the “English-only”-minded public.)

This paper argues that the degree to which the general public endorses or rejects linguistic diversity can more or less exactly be measured by the fluctuating political support behind the multiculturalist, “language-as-resource”-oriented (Ruiz, 1984, p. 28) legislative proposals, e.g. the “English Plus” resolutions, which appeared on the Congressional agenda for the first time in the mid-1990s.

By contrast, the federal-level popularity of the flagship “Official English” legislative proposals – which are unquestionably assimilation- and “language-as-problem”-oriented – will also be mapped to create a broader language policy context for the analysis.

3. The Origins of “English Plus”

The emergence and the early history of the “English Plus” movement is given a thorough treatment by Mary Carol Combs, former director of the English Plus Information Clearinghouse (EPIC) in Washington, D.C.

Combs describes “English Plus” as a “philosophy of inclusion and openness toward linguistic minority groups” (1992, p. 216), which, while acknowledging the importance of English proficiency in the United States, also “advocates the preservation of other languages and cultures” (1992, pp. 216-224).

Although generally perceived as an alternative to “English-only” (more precisely: “Official English”) legislation, “English Plus” originally appeared in the increasingly anti-bilingual education-oriented political atmosphere of the mid-1980s, marked by Education Secretary William J. Bennett’s speech in September 1985, urging a return to “the goal of learning English as *the* key to equal opportunity” (p. 217, emphasis added).

Responding to the new, assimilationist trend, a Miami-based civil rights organization, the Spanish-American League against Discrimination (SALAD) issued a statement arguing that English should only be regarded as *a* key to equal educational opportunity (emphasis added) besides “English plus math. Plus science. Plus social studies [...] plus competence in the home language” (Bennett, 2985, p. 217).

Czeglédi, S. (2015). EPIC fail? The birth and decline of the “English Plus” movement in the United States. *Topos* 4(1), 81-96.

The movement picked up steam fast. Soon, the diverse groups, organizations, and activists that embraced the goals of promoting maintenance bilingual education, multilingualism/multiculturalism, and language rights established a nationwide coalition in October 1987, to develop and coordinate language policy alternatives to “English-only”.

By 1990, fifty-six organizations belonged to EPIC officially (Combs, 1992, p. 218) – including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), and the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

Meanwhile, EPIC had failed to prevent the officialization of English in three states (Arizona, Colorado, and Florida), where voters agreed to amend their respective state constitutions at referenda held in November 1988. Two years later Alabama voters adopted an Official English state constitutional amendment by an overwhelming (89%) majority (Draper and Jiménez, 1992, p. 94).

Following a relatively calm period in the first half of the 1990s, Official English came back with a vengeance both at state and federal levels in 1995-96.

This two-year period witnessed the addition of five new states to the Official English fold: Montana, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Georgia. (For the complete list see e.g. the Official English Map by *ProEnglish* at <https://proenglish.org/official-english/state-profiles.html>. The federal-level language policy battles over the officialization issue are discussed below.)

Despite the appearance of the “English Plus” philosophy on the agenda of the Federal Congress in the form of the “English Plus” Resolutions from 1995 onwards, the cohesion of EPIC had already begun to crumble. Eventually, the coalition “fell victim to an unsteady funding stream in the mid-1990s” (Salomone, 2010, p. 150).

Among the relatively important – and largely symbolic – state-level successes of the “English Plus” movement were the nonbinding resolutions passed in New Mexico (1989), Oregon (1989), Washington (1989), and in Rhode Island (1992).

According to James Crawford (1997) these measures “served primarily as a tool to educate the public about language policy issues”, which, eventually proved to be insufficient to stem the tide of officialization.

In a slightly more critical analysis published ten years later Crawford acknowledged that “English Plus has never generated much enthusiasm among the public. It primarily seems to excite professionals in linguistics and language education, advocates of civil rights and ethnic pluralism” (Crawford, 2008, pp. 21-22).

Czeglédi, S. (2015). EPIC fail? The birth and decline of the “English Plus” movement in the United States. *Topos* 4(1), 81-96.

4. The Fate of “English Plus” in the U.S. Federal Congress

For more than fifteen years, the unquestionable (and frequently: the only) champion of the “English Plus” cause in the House of Representatives was José Enrique Serrano (D-NY), who had introduced not fewer than nine “English Plus” Resolutions in the House between 1995 and 2011. (He did so in every Congress, basically in identical form; the textual differences between the resolution versions were minimal.)

4.1 Language Wars during the 104th Congress (1995-96)

Serrano introduced the first federal-level “English Plus” resolution (H. Con. Res. 83) during the first Session of the 104th Congress, on July 13, 1995. It was a nonbinding, symbolic piece of legislation aimed to counter a formidable enemy: the “Language of Government Act of 1995” (H. R. 123 IH), a highly substantive and popular Official English bill, introduced in the House on January 4, 1995. Eventually, H. R. 123 passed the House on August 1, 1996, renamed as the “Bill Emerson English Language Empowerment Act of 1996” (H. R. 123 EH).

The main differences between the two proposals are highlighted in Table 1:

Table 1. Basic differences between the “English Plus” resolution and H. R. 123
(E=English; L=language)

	H. Con. Res. 83 IH	H. R. 123 IH
symbolic or substantive	symbolic	substantive
total number of (co)sponsors	43 (9.9%)	198 (45.5%)
party affiliation	42 Dem.+1 Rep.	176 Rep.+22 Dem.
Officialization as a goal	no	yes
Linguistic diversity as a problem or resource?	a “tremendous resource”	a(n implicit) problem
The societal role of English and other languages	E is the “primary language”	E is the “common language”
	multilingualism enhances economic competitiveness	E is the L of opportunity

Czeglédi, S. (2015). EPIC fail? The birth and decline of the “English Plus” movement in the United States. *Topos* 4(1), 81-96.

Table 1. (cont.) Basic differences between the “English Plus” resolution and H. R. 123
(E=English; L=language)

	H. Con. Res. 83 IH	H. R. 123 IH
	multilingualism fosters “greater understanding between nations”	E empowers immigrants to become responsible citizens and productive workers
	multilingualism “promotes greater cross-cultural understanding between different racial and ethnic groups in the United States”	E-only will promote efficiency and fairness in government
	multilingualism is an essential element of national security (cf. Native American “code talkers”)	foreign language teaching is not to be affected by the officialization of E
The government’s role	to encourage all residents of the U.S. to become fully proficient in English.	to encourage greater opportunities for individuals to learn the English language.
	to continue to provide services in languages other than English	to conduct its official business in English
	to encourage all residents to learn or maintain skills in a language other than English	the government has an “affirmative obligation to preserve and enhance the role of English as the official language”
	to assist indigenous peoples in their efforts to prevent the extinction of their languages and cultures	
	to recognize the importance of multilingualism, and oppose language restrictionist measures	

While the “English Plus” Resolution died in committee, H. R. 123 was passed by the House on August 1, 1996 – and contained further clarifications and restrictions.

The engrossed version of the Act set out to reform naturalization requirements by insisting on the implementation of (unspecified) fluency standards in English as a prerequisite to obtaining citizenship, and also prescribed that naturalization ceremonies be conducted in English (H. R. 123 EH, Sec. 102/a/‘Sec. 165‘/a-b/).

As a further blow to linguistic rights, Sec. 201 sought to put an end to the practice of bi- or multilingual voting materials as well.

Czeglédi, S. (2015). EPIC fail? The birth and decline of the “English Plus” movement in the United States. *Topos* 4(1), 81-96.

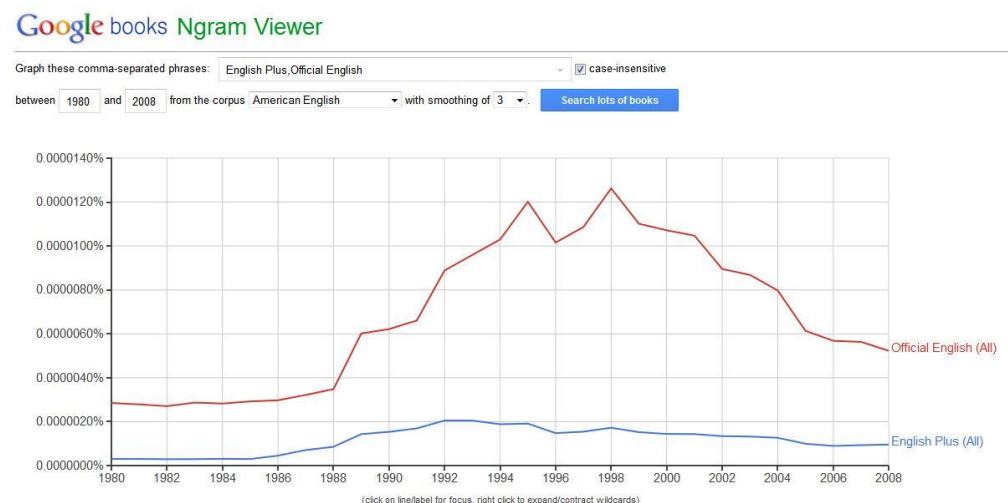
The Senate career of H. R. 123 was considerably shorter: an identical bill to H. R. 123 IH was introduced on February 3, 1995, designated as S. 356 IS. Although it had achieved 23% support in the Senate (i.e., it had attracted 22 cosponsors in addition to the original sponsor, Senator Richard Shelby /R-AL/), S. 356 never made it out of committee (S. 356 IS).

The downfall of S. 356 must have been hastened by a presidential veto threat by Bill Clinton – in the event of a Senate approval of the proposal (Crawford, 2000, p. 48).

4.2 Support behind the “English Plus” Resolutions before 2011

Even a simple, word frequency-based Google Books Ngram search indicates that “English Plus” had never been on a par with “Official English” – at least prior to 2008 (which is the current limit of the search engine):

Graph 2. “Official English” vs. “English Plus” in the Google Books database



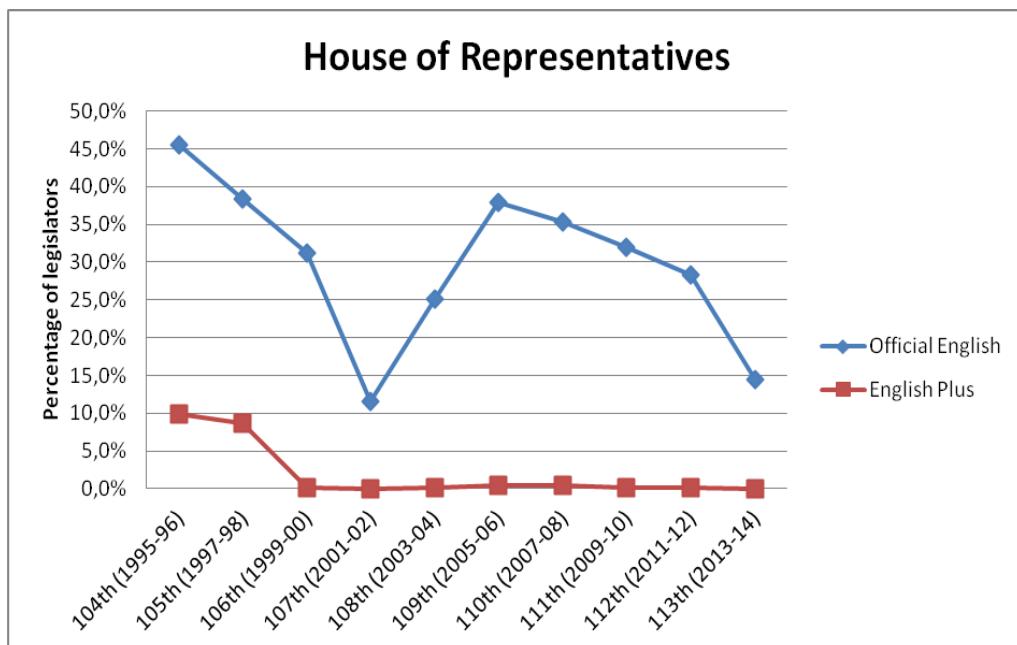
4.2.1 “English Plus” in the House

A more refined approach is to check the popularity of the leading “English Plus” and “Official English” legislative proposals in the House and the Senate based on the

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number of (co)sponsors behind the flagship bills and resolutions over time. All the data used came from congress.gov and www.govtrack.us.

Graph 3. “Official English vs. English Plus” in the House of Representatives



The data indicate that the “English Plus” Resolution loses its app. 10% popularity in the House almost entirely by 1999-2000. Simultaneously, the leading Official English proposal (this time: H.R. 280, the “National Language Act of 2001”) also hits the all-time low in the examined period by attracting only 49 cosponsors (11.5%) in the House.

After 9/11 the popularity of the officialization idea begins to soar – only to enter a phase of gradual decline after 2005-06. “English Plus”, however, practically disappears in the third millennium.

4.2.2 “English Plus” in the Senate

Although “English Plus” appeared later on the agenda of the Upper House, and even attracted more support from both sides of the aisle than in the lower chamber, the form of legislation in which it did so was the weakest of all options: the simple

Czeglédi, S. (2015). EPIC fail? The birth and decline of the “English Plus” movement in the United States. *Topos* 4(1), 81-96.

resolution. (Simple resolutions require neither the approval of the other Chamber nor the signature of the President, and they do not have the force of law.)

Altogether there were three legislative proposals introduced in the Senate during the examined period that contained the phrase “English Plus”:

1. S. Res. 236 IS, the Senate version of the “English Plus” resolution, introduced by Pete Domenici (R-NM) on May 22, 1998 (attracting 9 Republican cosponsors);
2. S. Res. 106 IS was the reintroduced (and identical) version of S. Res. 236 (dating back to May 24, 1999, with 11 Republican and 5 Democratic cosponsors);
3. S. 667 IS, the “EDucating America’s Children for Tomorrow (ED-ACT)”, introduced by John McCain (R-AZ) on March 18, 1999 in order to improve elementary and secondary education. Title IV, Sec. 401 of the bill endorsed multilingualism as an important economic and national security asset, while at the same time urged all American citizens to learn English. The bill had no cosponsors.

The Senate versions of the English Plus resolution reflected both the broader horizons of the upper chamber, and also the ethnic makeup of the main sponsors’ states (which were New Mexico and Arizona – both with very high percentages of Spanish-speaking populations).

The more global outlook of the Senate is shown in the frequencies of key words in S. Res. 236: e.g. “world” (10x); “global” (5x); “nations” (4x); and “international” (3x). The similar figures in the House version (H. Con. Res. 83) are: “world” (1x); “global” (1x); “nations” (1x); “international” (2x).

Table 2. Basic differences between the House and Senate versions of the “English Plus” resolution (E=English; L=language)

	H. Con. Res. 83 IH	S. Res. 236 IS
symbolic or substantive	symbolic	(very) symbolic
total number of (co)sponsors	43 (9.9%)	10 (10%); for S. Res. 106 IS: 17 (17%)
party affiliation	42 Dem.+1 Rep.	10 Rep.; for S. Res. 106 IS: 11 Rep.+5 Dem.
Officialization as a goal	no	no

Czeglédi, S. (2015). EPIC fail? The birth and decline of the “English Plus” movement in the United States. *Topos* 4(1), 81-96.

Table 2. (cont.) Basic differences between the House and Senate versions of the “English Plus” resolution (E=English; L=language)

	H. Con. Res. 83 IH	S. Res. 236 IS
Linguistic diversity as a problem or resource?	a “tremendous resource”	resource
The societal role of English and other languages	E is the “primary language”	E is the “common language” and “unifying language”
		E is “the most widely used L”; a “living library”; is becoming “the world’s common L”
	multilingualism enhances economic competitiveness	knowledge of English, Spanish, French, Italian, German, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, African languages, Farsi, sign language, etc., enhances competitiveness and tremendous growth in world trade
	multilingualism fosters “greater understanding between nations”	knowledge of other languages and other cultures enhances U.S. diplomatic efforts by fostering greater communication and understanding between nations
	multilingualism is an essential element of national security (cf. Native American “code talkers”)	indigenous American Indian languages should be preserved, encouraged, and utilized (e.g. as unbreakable codes)
	multilingualism “promotes greater cross-cultural understanding between different racial and ethnic groups in the United States”	knowledge of other languages can promote greater understanding between different ethnic and racial groups within the United States
		Spanish has a special role: it is the common bond of Hispanic people, and promoting the use of Spanish at home and in cultural affairs will benefit the economic interests of the entire U.S.

Czeglédi, S. (2015). EPIC fail? The birth and decline of the “English Plus” movement in the United States. *Topos* 4(1), 81-96.

Table 2. (cont.) Basic differences between the House and Senate versions of the “English Plus” resolution (E=English; L=language)

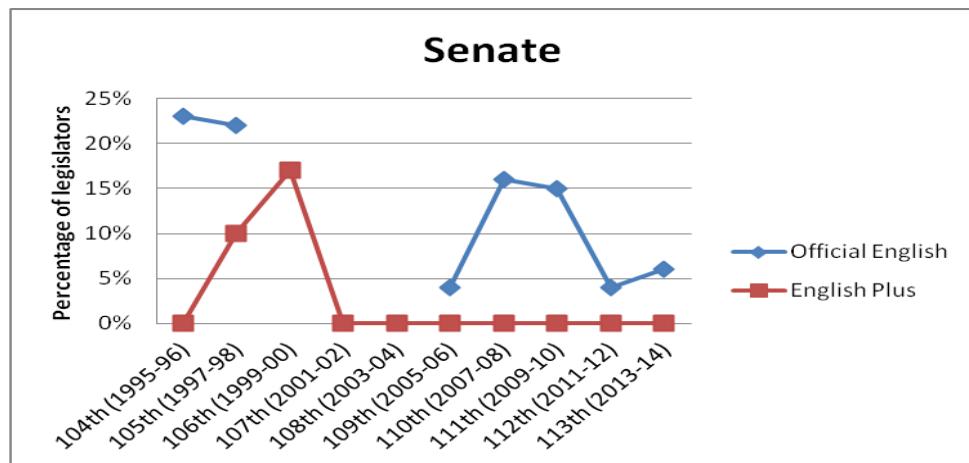
The government’s role	to encourage all residents of the U.S. to become fully proficient in English.	to support and encourage Americans to master the English language plus other languages of the world
	to continue to provide services in languages other than English	to recognize that knowledge of Spanish is vital for building future cultural and economic bridges to Latin America
	to encourage all residents to learn or maintain skills in a language other than English	
	to assist indigenous peoples in their efforts to prevent the extinction of their languages and cultures	
	to recognize the importance of multilingualism, and oppose language restrictionist measures	

The comparison shows that S. Res. 236 extolled the English language more than the House version and it did not set the goal to oppose “English-only” measures. Furthermore, the special (hemispheric and domestic) role of the Spanish language was also to be recognized. (At the same time, the Senate bill was careful to avoid using the word “multilingualism”.)

Nevertheless, despite its initial (modest) successes, the “English Plus” idea had totally disappeared from the Senate agenda by 2001:

Czeglédi, S. (2015). EPIC fail? The birth and decline of the “English Plus” movement in the United States. *Topos* 4(1), 81-96.

Graph 4. “Official English vs. English Plus” in the Senate

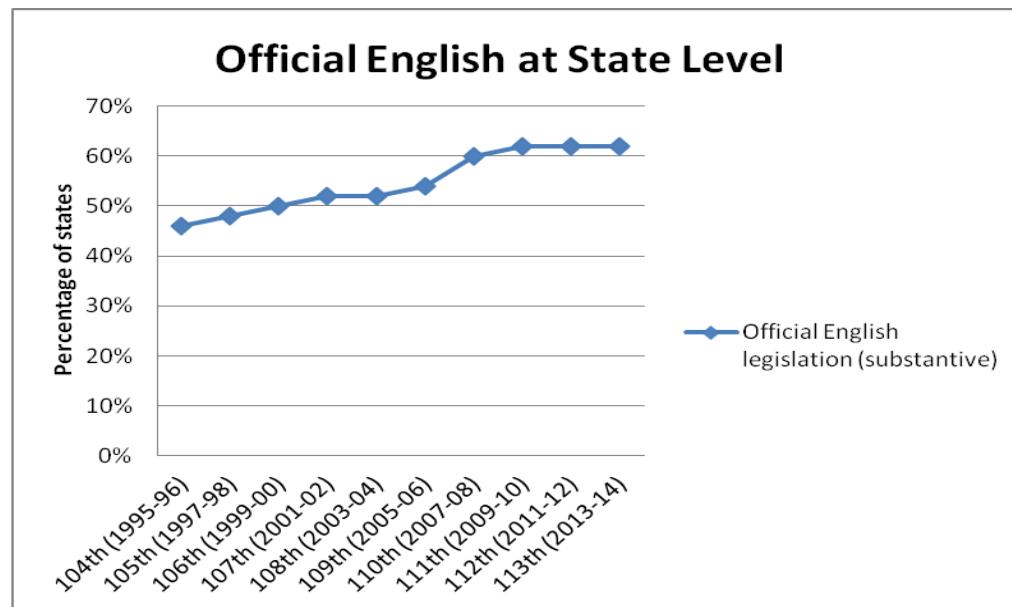


4.2.3 “English Plus” at State Level

Meanwhile, against the backdrop of fluctuating support behind the flagship Official English legislative proposals in the House and the Senate, the state-level officialization march continued, resulting in 31 Official English states by 2010, slowly but predictably approaching the next symbolic threshold, 38 states (amounting to three-fourths overall majority).

Czeglédi, S. (2015). EPIC fail? The birth and decline of the “English Plus” movement in the United States. *Topos* 4(1), 81-96.

Graph 5. “Official English vs. English Plus” state-level



During this period, no English Plus resolutions were adopted at state level, and it is unlikely that there will be a change in this trend any time soon.

5. Summary and Conclusion

This paper argued that the visceral, emotional reactions verging on nativism and even occasional racism following Coca-Cola’s 2014 multilingual Super Bowl commercial had been predictable from the assimilationist language policy tendencies of the past three decades.

In order to chart the nature and depth of the recent, assimilationist shift in American language ideology, the fate of the “English Plus” resolutions was chosen as an illustrative, and probably representative example of the general tendencies in the linguistic culture of the country.

Although achieved apparently spectacular, short term organizational and public relations successes immediately after its foundation in the mid-1980s, the “English Plus” movement basically failed to prevent “English-only” from spreading at state level. In addition, “English Plus” was merely trailing behind Official English in the federal legislative context, and achieved its limited mobilizing potential only when

Czeglédi, S. (2015). EPIC fail? The birth and decline of the “English Plus” movement in the United States. *Topos* 4(1), 81-96.

the passage of the assimilationist English Language Empowerment Act (H. R. 123) seemed inevitable in the mid-1990s.

Despite taking the form of harmful, nonbinding resolutions, “English Plus” was unable to secure sustained political support, which was a telltale sign of the long-term unviability of the idea. Although the Senate proposals fared considerably better, and even attracted prominent Republican politicians to (co)sponsor the pieces, these simple resolutions could have had no real legislative significance beyond the expression of the sentiments of the given chamber. Furthermore, “English Plus” had disappeared from the Senate agenda without a trace by 2001.

The House had held out longer, but eventually even José Serrano stopped introducing “English Plus” resolutions a few years ago: the last occasion he did so was on January 7, 2011 (designated as H. Con. Res. 8), which, in hindsight, appears to have been an unannounced, unnoticed but nevertheless historic moment that concluded the 15-year-long legislative fight for an idea which has so far proved to be grossly incompatible with the language-related expectations of the general public.

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