Immigration to the United States increased dramatically after 1860, particularly between 1890 and 1910, and the majority of immigrants shifted from northern Europe and Great Britain to southern and eastern Europe and Asia. As a result, the nativism that had once appeared as the Native American party, or Know Nothings, and later as the more general anti-foreigner/anti-Catholic movements of the 1880s, resurfaced in a new and even more pervasive form as the Americanization movement of the early twentieth century. Unlike earlier nativisms, which tended to attract the radical fringe, the Americanization movement proved more centrist, involving intellectuals, educators, social workers, business leaders, and legislators, and many of its supporters favored education over repression (Hartmann 1948, 8).

Reaction to the new immigration led to a significant amount of racism as well, though some of it had a genteel veneer of intellectualism and claimed grounding in such academic fields as anthropology, biology, and economics (Higham [1955] 1966, 155-56).

The Americanization movement produced conflicting theories of how to deal with the new immigrants and their supposed language handicaps. The remedies included outright exclusion, already decreed for the Chinese in 1882, and soon extended to the Japanese and Asian Indians, coupled with attempts to segregate those immigrants who were already in the country and prevent them indulging in such ordinary activities as fishing or owning dogs.* Between 1890 and 1920 entrance examinations, in English, were instituted for a variety of professions, like the law and civil service, and service related jobs, like barbering; their intent was clearly to exclude aliens (Leibowitz 1976, 461). Also popular were calls for extending the period before naturalization to as much as twenty-one years, and deportating aliens who had not learned the language after five years, a measure that was supported by Theodore Roosevelt. Although his desire to prevent the United States from becoming a “polyglot boarding house” full of “hyphenated Americans” is often cited as proof of Roosevelt’s uncompromising stand against immigration, Roosevelt did propose to naturalize Japanese immigrants. It was Woodrow Wilson, campaigning in California against this idea, who argued, “We cannot make a homogeneous population of a people who do not blend with the Caucasian race” (Leibowitz 1971, 29).

Although in 1917 seven states still allowed aliens to vote, after the war the mood of the country shifted more strongly toward strict control of immigration and of immigrants (Higham 1966, 214, 301). Just as Benjamin Franklin had not considered Germans to be “whites” in the eighteenth century, many native Americans—that is, assimilated immigrants from northern and western Europe—regarded the “new” southern and eastern Europeans as nonwhite. Higham reports that one Southern town
excluded Italians from white schools, and for many years California maintained separate schools for Chinese children (169).

**Language and the New Immigration**

The Immigration Commission, or Dillingham Commission, as it was popularly known, was a joint House-Senate group created in 1907 and chaired by Sen. William P. Dillingham of Vermont. Its charge was to study the issues resulting from the new, massive immigration. In 1911 the Dillingham commission issued a forty-volume report on its findings that attempted to demonstrate the undesirability of the new immigrants and their general unfitness for American life. Language was but a minor issue for the commission, which concerned itself more with proving increased rates of criminality and mental illness among the new immigrants, though it did suggest that adults from such nontraditional areas of immigration as Herzegovina, Spain, Bulgaria, and Turkey were much less likely to acquire English than their predecessors. (In contrast, Calvin Veltman [1983, 10] finds no sound data on which to base the assumption that some groups assimilated more easily than others.)

Despite the commission’s pessimism, its statistics showed that well over 95 percent of children born in the United States of foreign parents of all nationalities acquired English, and to no one’s surprise, it confirmed that the longer immigrants lived in the U.S., the more likely they were to learn English (Immigration Commission 1911, 1:474–84), though it also documented that 40 percent of immigrants to the U.S. returned to their countries of origin within five years. Such a high percentage of nonpermanent residents clearly works in favor of minority-language retention (Molesky 1988, 46). As proof of the importance of adults acquiring English, the Dillingham Commission found that American-born children of non-English-speaking fathers were more likely to be behind in school than children of foreign-born fathers who had acquired English (13:85). Curiously, the commission did not consider the effect of mothers’ language on children’s educational progress, though elsewhere it noted that because of their social isolation, adult foreign-born women were somewhat less likely than adult men to learn English.

There were, of course, a good number of commentators who supported the “new” immigration and who considered the work of Americanization to be a challenge rather than a curse. Horace Kallen (1924) viewed the latest wave of immigrants as even more intent on Americanizing than those who had come before, and John Gavit (1922, 253), who debunked the “legend” of the new immigration, supported this claim with a reanalysis of the Immigration Commission’s statistics, demonstrating, among other things, that “knowledge of the English language at the time of arrival is not a material factor in determining the rapidity with which the individual seeks citizenship,” and that nonanglophone immigrants had a higher rate of naturalization than did immigrants from English-speaking countries.

In any case, though, Gavit agreed that a knowledge of spoken English should be required for citizenship, and he argued strongly for requiring the ability to read English as well (416). Kallen (1924, 147) also noted that, despite differing attitudes toward the immigrants and what to expect from them, one thing was clear to virtually everyone: “The foreigner should be required to learn English.” In 1894 Rena Michaels Atchison, who viewed foreigners as paupers and criminals, called for a federal statute mandating
compulsory education in the national language. (Although all the states required communities to offer free public schools, compulsory education was a recent and far from universal concept: in 1852 Massachusetts became the first state to require school attendance for minors; sixteen states did not adopt compulsory education laws until the early 1900s, six of these after 1914.)

World War I accentuated the perception that Americanization via English was essential, and both public and private organizations urged compulsory Americanization classes, though Frank V. Thompson, the superintendent of the Boston public schools, who supported his state’s education requirement for all illiterates under twenty-one years of age, resisted the paradox that “to democratize our newer brethren we must resort to autocratic procedure.” Thompson continued, “Laws prohibiting the use of a foreign language below the high school level not only violate all the canons of modern pedagogy but are also in a certain sense undemocratic, un-American” (1920, 15, 290).

Massachusetts had a compulsory education law for illiterates under twenty before 1890. In 1918 New York State passed a law requiring nonanglophones between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one to study English in school or in special classes on the job, though according to Thompson it was not well enforced (306); New York supplemented this with funds to establish adult education programs for those over twenty-one, who were beyond the reach of the state’s compulsory education law. Utah required aliens up to age forty-five to learn English, though how effective this measure was is not clear. In 1919 the National Education Association called for compulsory Americanization classes (Kallen 1924, 147), though Thompson points out that many states instituting Americanization requirements (which usually meant English classes) for aliens did not actually fund such programs, and in some cases school districts were barred by law from using tax money to educate adults.

The D.A.R. Manual for Citizenship, first issued in 1920 in English and seventeen other languages, encouraged immigrants to learn English for practical reasons: it would help them to “work better, more easily, and more safely.” English would bring them better jobs and the respect of their children, who “will think that they know more than you, their parents, if you do not learn to speak English.” A knowledge of English would protect greenhorns, or “greeners,” as newcomers were often called, against swindlers, and it would make them into good citizens. The DAR believed English was best learned in school, not on the street, and it naively advised its readers to choose their neighborhood carefully, which suggests the authors were little acquainted with the limited housing options open to immigrants: “Do not live in the crowded parts of a city, among those who speak a foreign language. Associate and make friends with those who speak English. Live among them. Learn their customs and the American way of living” (DAR [1920] 1934, 9—11).

Between 1919 and 1921 some twenty states passed Americanization statutes (Forbes and Lemos 1981, 155), and most American universities and normal schools began offering Americanization as a subject for prospective teachers to study (Higham 1966, 382n). The Ford Motor Company, the Pennsylvania Railroad, Hart, Schaffner and Marx, International Harvester, and Kabo Corset, among others, taught English to employees on the job—Ford required attendance at English classes twice a week, after work (Higham, 244)—and unions backed the idea as well. The YMCA and local public schools introduced programs in adult education. The Los Angeles schools were among
the first to undertake the project; their night-school graduates received citizenship papers in formal ceremonies, and the diplomas were accepted by the local courts as proof of English competence in naturalization hearings (Hartmann 1948, 80).

While learning English was the order of the day, not everyone agreed that it had to be done at the expense of one’s native language. Herbert Adolphus Miller (1916, 38) expressed a common view that the maintenance of native languages “would tend to soften the abrupt transition from foreign to American ideas and ways of thought, and to obviate the breakdown in parental control and discipline often observed in immigrant families.” Earl Barnes (1918, 172-73) insisted that immigrants learn English, though he supported a weak form of cultural pluralism. Acknowledging that English could never replace an immigrant’s native language because of the “memory images” or “neuron patterns” already formed, Barnes added, “There would be a great loss in human thinking and feeling if all the world thought with the same patterns.” He considered it foolish to throw out what was good of German culture just because the Germans were momentarily out of favor. John J. Mahoney (1920, 15) agreed, cautioning language teachers not to overreact to war hysteria: “Americanization does not imply that the immigrant must give up his cherished spiritual heritage. His language, his religion, his social customs he may retain, and yet become a good American. Americanization is a giving, not a taking away. The wise worker in Americanization will adhere to the policy of `Hands off.' “

Nor was everyone agreed that the way to get newcomers to learn English was to require it. Frank V. Thompson (1920) argued that simply imposing language would not bring about Americanization. Edward A. Steiner (1914, 73), a German immigrant who became a clergyman and academic, felt that while the United States is “inhospitable to all foreign languages” (1916b, 94), forced language learning would assuredly backfire: “If there were a law compelling all immigrants to learn the English language, this country would be a linguistic battlefield in which every tongue from Sanskrit to Esperanto would struggle for supremacy and so destroy any hope of ever assimilating the `stranger within our gates.’ This subtle force of a common language creeps in everywhere, just because it is not driven” (1916a, 51).

Steiner’s loyalties to the land of his birth clearly lay behind his warning that if official English was perceived by German Americans as yet another pro-British move by the United States, they would resist it (1916b, 106). At the same time he firmly believed in assimilation, and cautioned that if the Germans succeed in “making German co-equal with English in our public schools” (1916b, 103), then the same rights would be demanded for Czech, Hungarian, “Scandinavian,” Finnish, and Yiddish, at the expense of national unity.

While many nativists still fear that the absence of an official-language law would lead inevitably to the building of a new Babel in the New World, Steiner took the opposite view. While he noted that in Canada, French and, to a lesser extent, Slavic languages remained a source of friction (1916b, 101), and cautioned that in the United States “a cleavage in the language now would mean to us a cleavage of the nation in its most vulnerable if not its most essential part” (102), Steiner warned that [—just as in the Bible—] Babel results not from a laissez-faire language policy but from official intervention: “If there had been governmental pressure brought to bear upon the immigrant’s use of English we would have fallen heir to the confusion of Babel, and to the never ending language problems of many of the countries of Europe” (1916a, 51).
Nathan Glazer (1966, 360), agreed with Steiner’s assessment of linguistic laissez-faire: “America produced without laws that which other countries, desiring a culturally unified population, were not able to produce with laws.” Both Fishman 1966 and Kloss 1966 come to this conclusion as well.

Like many an educated immigrant who adopted English as a vehicle of literary communication, Steiner resented what he perceived to be threats to the purity of his adopted tongue. He urged his readers to fight against the vulgarization of English “by our children, or by those whom they hear in the theater, the concert hall [he favored operas sung in English], and the schoolroom” (1916b, 106). Steiner complained as well of the prevalence of “coarse slang and vile oaths” and the inability of American college students “to speak a straight, dignified English sentence.”* This rigidity was coupled with a certain blindness to the flexibility of English. Steiner insisted that while all immigrants quickly learned to spice their native tongues with anglicisms, the English language never borrowed from the immigrants. His contention that, with the exception of a few indigestible food terms, “not one word [from an immigrant tongue] has obtruded itself permanently into our intellectual and emotional life” (100) is easily dismissed. (See, for example, Mencken 1919.)

Frances Kellor was a leading Americanization activist who at first embraced, but then drew back from, the required learning of English. As early as 1910 Kellor advocated compulsory schooling for nonanglophones and illiterates, together with the training of teachers in minority languages (Lape 1915). But ultimately her efforts were in the area of voluntary assimilation. Kellor supported the stocking of libraries with non-English materials to encourage native-language literacy (an idea that was controversial at the time—many library boards fearing a nativist backlash if they expended public funds on non-English materials—and one that is sometimes expressed by English-first supporters today as well).

Kellor’s National Americanization Committee launched an “English Language First” drive to get immigrants to learn the language voluntarily and obtain their citizenship. Kellor balanced the English-first concerns for civics and for improved efficiency and safety in the workplace with the clear need for foreign languages in business and the desire to “safeguard American liberty more by encouraging free speech in all tongues than by limiting it to one.” Fearing it as a potential tool for hatred and repression, Kellor emphasized that the decision on compulsory English must be made “on broader grounds than those inspired by fear, prejudice or resentment” (1920, 235—36).

The National Americanization Committee established a model project in Detroit, working with that city’s Board of Commerce and local employers to encourage—or sometimes to coerce—employees to attend English classes. The Ford Motor Company’s motion picture division made a movie depicting nonanglophones being turned away from jobs, and the foreign-language press and social agencies did what they could to steer immigrants into school. As a result of these efforts, night school attendance rose by more than 150 percent (Hartmann 1948, 129-30), though there were still many adults who were not served by the relatively small number of programs available: Thompson (1920, 59—60) notes that, despite its dramatic increase in attendance, the Detroit program reached only eleven thousand students, a mere 5 percent of that city’s foreign-born adults. Today as well there are more nonanglophones seeking to acquire English than
educational facilities can accommodate, an indication that assimilation and the learning of English remain vital to nonanglophones living in the United States.

Postwar Legislation

The question of compulsory English figures prominently in the debates over literacy requirements for voting and naturalization, which we have examined in chapters 2 and 5. It appears as well in the congressional debate over Americanization. In 1920 the U.S. Senate considered an Americanization bill sponsored by the Bureau of Education of the Department of the Interior. The bill would have provided $12.5 million to states requiring all native American illiterates under the age of twenty-one and all nonanglophone aliens under forty-five to become literate in English. Students would attend two hundred hours of English classes a year until they could pass a language examination to be set by the Secretary of the Interior. The Senate sponsor of the bill, William S. Kenyon of Iowa, insisted that the measure was not meant to insult or penalize immigrants, and that it would make native Americans more sensitive to the problems of the foreign-born. Kenyon admitted that learning English would “not make an American out of a person,” though he considered it a necessary if not sufficient “step toward getting a nation of 110 million people to act and think without a foreign accent” (Congressional Record [1920] 59:1650). Kenyon contended that ignorance of English correlated with higher rates of factory and mine accidents, increased worker turnover, lower wages, poor productivity, and industrial unrest.

In arguing for adoption of the bill, Kenyon cited the 1918 annual report of Franklin K. Lane, Secretary of the Interior, who found that 10 percent of the residents of the United States could not read the laws of the land, and that a similar percentage of draftees during World War I were unable to read an order in English or write a letter home. (Others quote a 24 percent illiteracy rate among World War I draftees.) Lane argued that “all Americans must be taught to read and write and think in one language; this is a primary condition to that growth which all nations expect of us and which we demand of ourselves” (Report of the Secretary of the Interior 1918, 16). Lane asked, with a rhetorical flourish,

What should be said of a democracy which is challenged by the world to prove the superiority of its system of government over those discarded, and yet is compelled to reach many millions of its people through papers printed in some foreign language. . . . [or] which permits tens of thousands of its native-born children to be taught American history in a foreign language—the Declaration of Independence and Lincoln’s Gettysburg speech in German and other tongues? . . . [or] which permits men and women to work in masses where they seldom or never hear a word of English spoken? (Report 1918, 16)

Lane’s recommendation was to make education a federal as well as a state concern. With all the other federal controls going into effect for highways, interstate commerce, and agriculture, Lane was optimistic that “surely without violation of our fundamental law we
can find a way by which the Nation can know that all of its people are able to talk and read our own language” (17).

The Senate initially passed the Americanization proposal of the Interior Department over objections that it would discourage foreign business, that the government was overestimating the effect of a common language, and that imposition of the German language in Poland had only solidified Polish nationalism in opposition to the measure. However, the House rejected both the idea of federal intervention and the high price tag that accompanied it, and the federal government’s role in educating nonanglophones was deferred for fifty years.

The United States Supreme Court did take a stand on the foreign-language restrictions resulting from the war. After World War I, sentiment against foreign languages was so strong that some states banned all foreign-language instruction at the elementary level. These laws had as their common target “the harmful effects of non-American ideas inculcated through the teaching of foreign languages” (State of Iowa v. Bartels 181 NW 508, later reversed), and it took a U.S. Supreme Court decision, Meyer v. Nebraska, in 1923 to overturn such laws in Nebraska, Iowa, Ohio, and elsewhere.

In 1919 the Nebraska legislature, in response to the recommendations of the war-oriented State Council of Defense, which had condemned state schools and the state university as “unpatriotic and seditious” (Thompson 1920, 296), passed an open meeting law, which is still in force, requiring that discussions of “political or nonpolitical subjects or questions of general interest . . . be conducted in the English language exclusively” (Nebraska 1919, chap. 234). According to Molesky (1988, 52), by 1919 some fifteen states had adopted similar English-only open meeting laws. Religious gatherings and lodges were exempted from Nebraska’s English requirement, though one critic of the statute remarked wryly, “It is difficult to understand why a secret society or lodge should be favored over the legitimate meetings of more democratic citizens” (Luckey 1919, 118). In the same year, the Nebraska legislature tried unsuccessfully to abolish private schools (Thompson 1920, 130). In 1921 Nebraska did pass a comprehensive act making English the state’s official language, prohibiting foreign-language education before the ninth grade, and protecting the use of English in all public gatherings. According to section 4 of Nebraska’s English-only, or Siman Law, “It shall be unlawful for any organization, whether social, religious or commercial, to prohibit, forbid or discriminate against the use of the English language in any meeting, school or proceeding, and for any officer, director, member or person in authority in any organization to pass, promulgate, connive at, publish, enforce or attempt to enforce any such prohibition or discrimination.” Violators were subject to fines ranging from twenty-five to one hundred dollars, and up to thirty days in jail.

Nebraska’s law was strict and detailed, but not unique in this respect. South Dakota’s statute marked an English education as a fundamental civic right, adding: It shall be unlawful for any person or persons to act, aid, assist, advise or be instrumental in abridging or attempting to abridge the privilege of any child to receive such [English] instruction by submitting therefor instruction in some foreign language either by shortening the course of instruction in English in any school or by coercing, requiring or inducing any child to withdraw from a school in which instruction is given in English to attend a school in which instruction is given in any foreign language. (Cited in Flanders 1925, 21)
As we have seen, Illinois resisted the postwar suppression of foreign-language instruction. Connecticut and Vermont also refused to pass anti-foreign-language laws, and a bill targeting Japanese-language supplementary schools failed in Washington state. New Hampshire, which sought to accommodate its vocal French Catholic minority, adopted a compromise measure, with the approval of the state’s Franco-American bishop, requiring instruction and administration in English but permitting foreign languages in devotional exercises and as subjects for elementary school instruction. Indeed, the National Catholic War Council declared in favor of English as the language of instruction in parochial schools so long as foreign languages were permitted in the curriculum, though many ethnic Catholics resented the English-first stance of the Irish-dominated American church hierarchy (Thompson 1920, 292–301; Lemaire 1966, 257).

**Meyer v. Nebraska**

In 1921 the French war hero Marshal Ferdinand Foch came to the United States on a triumphant visit, crisscrossing the country, accepting presents, collecting over a dozen honorary degrees from major universities, and speaking to adulatory crowds. The governor of Nebraska invited Foch to address the International Hero Congress in Omaha, but the New York Times pointed out that if he were to do so, the marshal, who spoke little English, would certainly be in violation of that state’s English-only open-meeting law. The Times had eagerly supported bans on German at the start of the war but now considered Nebraska’s pro-English measures, which had been passed in order to suppress the use of German in the state, unacceptable and unsophisticated because they were applied instead to a language of the Allies. In a derisive editorial the Times sniffed, “Possibly the Marshal, if he goes to Omaha, will be able to scrape up enough English to tell the Nebraskans what he thinks of their silly laws” (30 July 1921, p. 8). But Foch, although he traveled to South Dakota and Minnesota, did not make a formal visit to Omaha.

In addition to the open meeting law, chapter 249 of the Nebraska Sessions Laws of 1919 prohibited the teaching of any foreign language before the completion of the eighth grade. Specifically, the applicable part of the statute reads, “No person, individually or as a teacher, shall in any private, denominational, parochial or public school, teach any subject to any person in any language other than the English language.” Robert T. Meyer, a teacher in the Lutheran-run Zion Parochial School, was fined twenty-five dollars because, as the complaint read, “between the hour of 1 and 1:30 on May 25, 1920,” he taught German to ten-year-old Raymond Papart, who had not yet passed the eighth grade. The Nebraska Supreme Court affirmed Meyer’s conviction for “the direct and intentional teaching of the German language” (107 Neb. 657 [1922]).

Meyer, whose offense consisted of reading a German Bible story, claimed he was giving religious instruction in a parochial school outside normal school hours. In his support, his superiors argued that the school wanted students to learn enough German so that they could worship with their parents. Meyer further maintained that the anti-foreign-language statute wrongfully interfered with his right to choose and pursue a profession, as protected by the Fourteenth Amendment; that imparting knowledge in a foreign language was not inherently immoral or inimical to the public welfare; and that foreign-language instruction was not a legitimate subject for prohibitory legislation. The
law, Meyer’s appeal concluded, operated to deny him equal protection, and it denied parents the right to determine what their children would be taught.

The relevant portion of the Fourteenth Amendment reads, “No state . . . shall deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law,” and had already been construed by the courts as guaranteeing the right to pursue a profession. The Nebraska Supreme Court disagreed, finding that control of the school curriculum was within the legitimate jurisdiction of the state. It decided that the Bible story reading was not a purely devotional exercise, but rather instruction in the German language as such, an activity proscribed by state law: “The fact that the study of the language is mingled with the study of a religious subject does not afford the teacher protection as against the penalty imposed by the statute.”

In Nebraska v. McKelvie (108 Neb. 448, 187 N.W. 927 [1922], also reversed by the U.S. Supreme Court as a result of the Meyer v. Nebraska decision), the Nebraska Supreme Court had ruled that Latin, Greek, and Hebrew used exclusively for religious purposes were not covered by the state’s instructional ban and could be taught outside normal school hours. However, in the Meyer case the state supreme court determined that the McKelvie decision did not apply, for unlike the “so-called ancient or dead languages . . . it does not appear that the German language is a part of the religion of this church.” The state court further concluded that Meyer’s school had purposely changed its afternoon hours to set aside time during the normal school day for German instruction in an attempt to circumvent Nebraska’s English-only law. The court agreed with the state’s argument describing “the baneful effects of permitting foreigners who had taken residence in this country, to rear and educate their children in the language of their native land.” Such a situation, because it proved “inimical” to the public safety, inculcating in the children of immigrants “ideas and sentiments foreign to the best interests of this country,” fell within the police powers of the state.

The Nebraska court dismissed the usefulness of foreign-language instruction for the young. It found that most parents, with the exception of some who were foreign-born, “have never deemed it of importance to teach their children foreign languages before such children have reached the eighth grade.” It agreed as well that the teaching of a foreign language was harmful to the health of the young child: “The hours which a child is able to devote to study in the confinement of school are limited. It must have ample time for exercise or play. Its daily capacity for learning is comparatively small.” Such an argument was consistent with the educational theory of the day, which held as late as the 1950s that bilingualism led to confusion and academic failure, and was harmful to the psychological well-being of the child. (According to Hakuta [1985, 27], the psychologist Florence Goodenough argued in 1926 that the use of a foreign language in the home was a leading cause of mental retardation.)

Justice Letton, who had written the opinion protecting Latin, Greek, and Hebrew in Nebraska v. McKelvie, dissented from the state court opinion. Not arguing from ethnicity or patriotism, but taking the view that language study was an essential part of a liberal education—a view not generally expressed at the time either by supporters or opponents of English-only laws, or by the court majority—Letton found that the state had interfered with the parents’ right to teach their children “any science or art, or any language which contributes to a larger life, or to a higher and broader culture.” He criticized the notion that language study was harmful to children, finding it the misguided
result of “crowd psychology . . . a product of the passions engendered by the World War.” Letton asserted that early childhood was the best time to learn a foreign or classical language and argued that the state had “no right to prevent parents from bestowing upon their children a full measure of education in addition to the state required branches.” In his opinion, just as the state cannot prevent the study of music, art, or crafts, it cannot prohibit the study of foreign language unless that study interferes with the English education prescribed by state law.

The state and federal appeals courts, reacting both to Germany’s role in World War I and to the problems the American Army had in dealing with draftees who could not understand English as the language of command, upheld Meyer’s conviction, but that decision was reversed by the U.S. Supreme Court (262 US 390 [1923]). Writing the majority opinion for the court, Associate Justice James Clark McReynolds admitted that “the desire of the legislature to foster a homogenous people with American ideals, prepared readily to understand current discussions of civic matters, is easy to appreciate.” McReynolds found that desire to have been quickened by “unfortunate experiences during the late war, and aversion toward every characteristic of truculent adversaries.” He agreed that an informed citizenry needed to be literate in English, but he concluded that such an end could not be attained by unconstitutional means (McReynolds would later resist the innovations of the New Deal on similar constitutional grounds). In fact, the court affirmed that English could be required in schools: “The power of the state to compel attendance at some school and to make reasonable regulations for all schools, including a requirement that they shall give instructions in English, is not questioned.” Moreover, McReynolds rejected the argument that the ban on foreign-language instruction was related to concern for the students’ mental and physical health: “It is well known that proficiency in a foreign language seldom comes to one not instructed at an early age, and experience shows that this is not injurious to the health, morals, or understanding of the ordinary child.” He maintained that “mere knowledge of the German language cannot reasonably be regarded as harmful” and that the Nebraska legislature had “attempted materially to interfere with the calling of modern language teachers, with the opportunities of pupils to acquire knowledge, and with the power of parents to control the education of their own.”

McReynolds noted the intention of the Nebraska legislature “to promote civic development by inhibiting training and education of the immature in foreign tongues and ideals before they could learn English and acquire American ideals.” He conceded the charge “that the foreign-born population is very large, that certain communities commonly use foreign words, follow foreign leaders, move in a foreign atmosphere, and that the children are thereby hindered from becoming citizens of the most useful type, and the public safety is imperiled.” But he concluded that

the protection of the Constitution extends to all,—to those who speak other languages as well as to those born with English on the tongue. Perhaps it would be highly advantageous if all had ready understanding of our ordinary speech, but this cannot be coerced by methods which conflict with the Constitution,—a desirable end cannot be promoted by prohibited means. . . . No emergency has arisen which renders knowledge by a child
of some language other than English so clearly harmful as to justify its inhibition, with the consequent infringement of rights long freely enjoyed.

Dissenting from this opinion, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes affirmed that the goal of having an English-speaking country was both desirable and legal; that youth was the best time to learn the English language; and that since there were parts of the state of Nebraska where a child could hear only Polish or French or German, it was not unreasonable to require that child to hear only English at school. Furthermore, Holmes maintained that an English-only requirement “is not an undue restriction of the liberty either of teacher or scholar. No one would doubt that a teacher might be forbidden to teach many things.” While Holmes favored Nebraska’s English-only “experiment,” he did agree with the rest of the court in striking down the Ohio law specifically prohibiting the teaching of German below the eighth grade (Pohl v. Ohio, Bohning v. Ohio, USSCR 67:1051).

The decision in Meyer v. Nebraska was to some extent an empty victory for language teachers. World War I had forced the assimilation of German Americans, taking its toll on the study and use of German in the United States; no doubt the process of assimilation would have been completed without the war as well, though perhaps not quite so quickly. Kloss (1966; 1977) reports that in 1900 there were more than 600,000 students of German in American elementary schools; by the 1930s that number dropped to 70,000. Similarly, in 1915 some 324,000 students—close to 25 percent of the student population—studied German in American high schools (in contrast, only 8.8 percent were enrolled in French classes). By 1922 only 0.6 percent—fewer than 14,000 high school students—were taking German, while the percentage studying French had risen to 15.5 (Gilbert 1981, 263).

Because of changing immigration patterns and a change in the popular attitude toward Germany and its people, the status of German in the United States had shifted from immigrant mother tongue to that of a relatively unimportant supplemental or foreign language. After World War I, high school German enrollments climbed back only to about 2 percent. More and more private schools dropped German as the primary language of instruction, and German congregations generally shifted to English for their worship. This precipitous decline in the study of German, coupled with the high court’s unequivocal stand on foreign-language teaching, meant that during World War II, American anti-German sentiment could no longer focus on language, and there were fewer attempts to suppress German in the schools or on the streets. On the contrary, official efforts during the Second World War supported special German instruction for intelligence gathering and the armed forces. Figures for German study dropped sharply again during and after World War II. In 1948, 43,000 students attended high school German classes, but that was only 0.8 percent of the student population, which suggests some anti-German backlash. Enrollments have since crept up once again to the interwar figure of 2 percent; postwar French study declined as well, to 4.7 percent in 1948, indicating a general loss of interest in foreign languages in American schools as the country once again turned inward, a loss of interest that neither the Sputnik crisis of the 1950s nor the balance of trade crisis of the 1980s has been able to reverse significantly.
Nonanglophone Children in School

The Supreme Court decision in Meyer v. Nebraska dealt with the rights of teachers to teach and of parents to control what their children learn. It did not confront the question of official English, which in fact seemed like a good idea to the court, nor did it deal with the question that remains as pressing today as it was in the 1920s: how to educate nonanglophone children in American public schools.

In 1903 fourteen states required elementary instruction in English. By 1923 that number had risen to thirty-four (Flanders 1925). In part this change represents the increased involvement of the states in educational matters: during this time, legislation was passed in a broad range of areas from mandatory physical education and fire drills to required instruction in the metric system (a constitutional provision in Utah for some years) and the humane treatment of household pets. However, as we have seen, language was a broad area of concern for legislators, and school laws on the subject would have been passed in any case.

Samuel Insull (see chapter 4) and others like him entrusted the task of Americanizing immigrants to the American public school system. It was the schools, after all, where immigrant children were first exposed to the ideals of their new homeland. It was assumed, for example, that while children might pick up English on the streets, it would not be good English, which could only be achieved through the intervention of formal education. The schools would expose children to everything from Americanism to the principles of hygiene. (It was assumed by the health authorities that working class immigrants did not know how to bathe, take care of children, or prepare food; William H. Maxwell, superintendent of the New York City schools, claimed immigrant children even had to be taught how to play [Education 1913, 19].) And education in English was assumed to be the key to upward mobility in America. At least that is the picture that generations of educators, social workers, historians, and politicians have painted of the one institution charged with the task of melting foreigners down until they became unhyphenated Americans. However, in coupling English instruction with Americanization, or civics, as it also came to be known, school texts portrayed most minorities negatively, and while this may have caused many children to reject their roots, it did not encourage the positive self-image necessary for success, but contributed instead to what Richard Rodriguez (1982, 18) has called “the pain of public alienation.”

Unfortunately, the schools were not wellprepared to de-punctuate their charges. They paid little attention to the special language needs of their immigrant children, and many children managed to learn English in spite of rather than because of the schools they attended (Higham 1966, 235—36). Several midwestern cities did maintain public German-English schools, and most reports suggest these were successful. For example, in 1889 the superintendent of Cincinnati’s schools, John B. Peaslee, declared, “Those who devote one half of their school time to a foreign language learn fully as much as those who do not, and in some cases, as for instance composition, even more” (cited in Kloss 1940, 1:470). Although he accepted Cleveland’s bilingual German-English schools without comment, the educator Herbert Adolphus Miller (1916, 75) complained that “the problem of teaching foreign children to speak English has never been regarded by the public schools as one of their serious problems.” Miller recommended
Americanizing speakers of languages besides German by adapting the methods of what he thought of as model English instruction programs in Puerto Rico and the Philippines, though as we shall see below, such teaching was relatively unsuccessful as well.

Frank V. Thompson lamented the fact that no special provisions were made for nonanglophone students and strongly objected to the common practice of placing non-English-speaking children in the lowest grades or in the “backward” or remedial classes. The so-called “steamer classes” instituted as early as 1901 by such cities as Boston, Cleveland, Rochester, and New York City were supposed to offer short periods of intensive English instruction to newly arrived children before mainstreaming them into the regular curriculum, but they accommodated only a small fraction of the eligible students and suffered from poor teacher preparation and inadequate methodology (Thompson 1920, 16–17, 118–19).

Non-English-speaking children were treated just like their anglophone comrades: they were all but ignored in the planning of lessons that presumed native-speaker language competence. A survey of state and city English language curricula through the 1920s confirms a general silence on the question of teaching English to nonanglophone children, except for the occasional remark about the need to correct foreign accents and short lists of the types of pronunciation gaffes or errors in idiom different ethnic groups were likely to make. Although the California Immigration Commission (1920, 440, 459) opposed the English-only movement before, during, and after World War I, encouraging specialized research in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and applauding the appointment of an ESL instructor at the Los Angeles State Normal School to train teachers on Saturdays, the California Department of Education merely told its teachers to teach correct pronunciation to foreign pupils by means of “facial exercises [promoting] free and flexible lip, tongue, and jaw action” (California Department of Education 1932, 9). Massachusetts listed characteristic errors of pronunciation made by “foreign children,” including the pronunciation of length with a short vowel (Massachusetts Board of Education 1916, 10). New York State would cure “dialectic difficulties” with “tip-tongue exercises” for Russians and Germans and “base tongue exercises” for those with Latin accents (1919, 9–10). And New York City instructed its teachers that “the child of foreign parents has, in most cases, learned the language incorrectly from his associates and to this jargon he adds his foreign accent,” which produced such pronunciation “errors” as wuz for was, kewpon for coupon, Toosday for Tuesday, horse for hoarse, littel or litle for little, and unaspirated initial wh—(for example, witch for which). The Board of Education condemned as well such atrocities as couldjou and wanta, forms that are still under attack in the New York City schools. The city recommended “vocal gymnastics and phonic drills” to correct these supposed anomalies, many of which are now considered fairly standard features of spoken English (1918, 2–3). As late as 1966 the linguist Harold Allen found the basic problem confronting ESL instruction in American schools to be “inadequately prepared teachers and inadequate materials,” coupled with a distinct lack of recognition of ESL as an academic discipline in which research could be done or teachers trained (Allen 1966, Introduction).

In the face of teachers’ passivity and the occasional hit or miss approach to nonanglophones in the classroom, Sarah T. Barrows (1922, 368–69) advocated a more active form of intervention. In her discussion of immigrant children in the kindergarten classroom, Barrows asserted that lack of English constituted a linguistic handicap, and
she warned against the teachers’ assumption that immersion was all that was necessary to inculcate English. Barrows observed an unwillingness of nonanglophone children to speak in the classroom, a situation that produced, “an inertia, a habit of silence, which is hard to overcome. . . . In many schools the foreign-speaking child is allowed to come day after day and sit through the session, the teacher thinking that he will eventually begin to understand what he hears and will then naturally begin to speak.”

What actually happened, according to Barrows, was that nonanglophone children understood less than teachers realized, and that their power to express themselves in English lagged even farther behind, particularly if they were exposed to English only in the classroom. Because such children invariably fell behind in subject matter too, she advocated “giving them a thorough foundation in English before requiring as much of them as is expected from children of American parents” (370). Barrows would not ban the child’s use of a foreign language—in fact, she found bilingualism to be “a distinct advantage,” a position that contradicted much of the language psychology of her day. But she would use the kindergarten class to reverse children’s linguistic priorities, training them to regard English as their “mother tongue” and their “mother’s tongue [as] the foreign language” (371).

Unfortunately, Barrows’s concern with the problems of nonanglophones was exceptional. Colin Greer (1972) confirms that schools did not assimilate immigrant children well. More children failed in school than succeeded, and large numbers of them dropped out altogether. The Dillingham Commission found from 60 to 70 percent of children of foreign-born parents to be “retarded” in school (Immigration Commission 1911, 13:86). The figures Greer cites are similarly discouraging: in 1904, for example, 39 percent of New York City elementary pupils were as much as two years below grade level. Remedial classes were packed with immigrants from all ethnic groups, and for most students the promise of social mobility through education was an empty one. In 1910 New York City had a 30 percent high school dropout rate, which increased to 50 percent in the 1940s as the proportion of the teenage population attending high school increased. Greer claims that rather than promoting mobility, “the schools were more often agencies for maintaining social status pretty much as they found it.” Even half of those immigrants from the most “favored” ethnic groups, the English and the Welsh, remained unskilled laborers (100). As Greer sees it, those immigrants who managed to succeed in bettering themselves in America did so because of the experience they brought with them from the old country and their ability to establish a middle class within their limited ethnic unit before entering the American bourgeoisie at large (84).

“Good English Makes Good Americans”

The public schools were dedicated to the inculcation of patriotism as well as English: by 1923 thirty-nine states required public schools to display the American flag (Flanders 1925, 10). The schools added to the already powerful equation of English with Americanism another powerful concept: that fluency in English was an indication of clear or logical thinking, which in turn was deemed necessary to the proper functioning of a democracy. In fact, while linguistic fluency certainly enhances comprehension, it may often disguise muddy logic or hide deceptive ideas, but the notion that good English was a sign not just of patriotism but of truth as well has proven so attractive in twentieth-
century American classrooms that it has become all but impossible to dislodge. And
good English could not be taught too early. Barrows (1922, 376) argued that
kindergarten should be devoted to the acquisition of the language: “Our only hope for the
future of the country lies in an enlightened patriotism, which can be attained only if our
children are trained to clear and direct thinking, to clear and forcible expression of
thought, and to a recognition of the responsibilities and duties which are theirs because
they are an indispensable part of a great nation.”

Translating this sentiment into classroom practice, schools across the United
States launched good English drives as part of their Americanization efforts, and children
earned points for linguistic espionage—perhaps not the most democratic of lessons—
reporting the language errors of their classmates to their teachers. Good English
campaigns from 1918 to the early 1920s consciously attacked the problem of what the
schools considered the contamination of English by foreigners. They sought to ridicule
and root out the errors of the non-native speaker. Supporting one such effort, a
schoolteacher named Margaret Burnside wrote, “Isn’t this a fitting time to make our
language pure, to make it represent the highest, the noblest, the most beautiful in our
thoughts, to make it American without a hyphen?” (1918, 658). And the campaigns
produced such language loyalty oaths as the following “Pledge for Children” of the
Chicago Woman’s Club American Speech Committee:

I love the United States of America. I love my country’s flag. I love my
country’s language. I promise:
1. That I will not dishonor my country’s speech by leaving off the last
syllables of words.
2. That I will say a good American “yes” and “no” in place of an Indian
grunt “um-hum” and “nup-um” or a foreign “ya” or “yeh” and “nope.”
3. That I will do my best to improve American speech by avoiding loud,
rough tones, by enunciating distinctly, and by speaking pleasantly, clearly,
and sincerely.
4. That I will learn to articulate correctly as many words as possible during
the year. (Robbins 1918, 175)

These Good English campaigns had the practical advantage of being more
democratic than English as a Second Language instruction—every child, not just the
nonanglophone, could benefit from a unit on language improvement. As Robbins noted,
even pupils in an exclusive private school, who have “never had their speech affected by
foreign-born children . . . without exception try to talk as badly as they can” (1918, 167).
Such programs were also easier to incorporate into the school syllabus, since they
presumed a knowledge of correctness in English that teachers were supposed to have
acquired as part of the teacher certification process, while no one really knew with any
certainty how to teach English to nonanglophones. In the mid—1920s, there was almost
no literature on ESL instruction for children, and very little had been written on ESL for
adults, but books and pamphlets on correct English abounded.

To a great extent, the absence of a workable methodology meant that adult
education in English, sentimentalized in such works as Leo Rosten’s The Education of
H*y*m*a*n K*a*p*l*a*n (1937), was actually not much better than that found in the
elementary schools. What few adult facilities there were existed only in urban areas—Thompson (1920, 9) estimates that in 1910 only 1.3 percent of the foreign-born adult population attended night schools. And until the 1920s the sole qualifications a teacher needed to serve in the evening schools were the ability to speak English and the desire for overtime pay. Even later, when adult education programs were staffed by certified day school teachers, critics scoffed that methods used to teach children would fail with adults. Night school students often complained about the childishness of their lessons (Forbes and Lemos 1981, 159), a problem sadly confirmed by contemporary educators who found that night school materials and methods were seldom age—or subject-appropriate, ranging from the extremes of “Run, Spot, run” to abstract, incomprehensible lectures on tense and inflection (Lape 1915; Thompson 1920).

Parkhurst Whitney (1923, 13), who believed that “it’s pretty hard to make an American out of a man, or woman, who can neither read nor speak, let alone think, American,” criticized Americans for assuming “that the man or woman who doesn’t know our language doesn’t know anything.” Whitney understood that the concept of native-tongue language loyalty must be taken into account in teaching English to immigrants, observing that “for a thousand years the racial minorities of Europe have protected their language against the encroachment of more powerful neighbors.” Moreover, he found night schools to be ineffective in scope—they served only 10 percent of the nation’s foreign born adults—and methodology, for which he quoted the complaints of a night school principal: “The prevailing method of teaching is uninteresting, and much of the stuff taught is worthless. . . . [The immigrant] is put in a child-sized seat, and disciplined as if he were a child, by some young teacher fresh from the normal school. He is set to reciting childish verses, and to learning dry rules of grammar. I have seen a teacher drill a class for a whole hour on the difference between ’this’ and ’that.’”

Frank Thompson, who favored drilling children on correct pronunciation because they are pliant enough to lose their accents, objected to the overemphasis on phonics in adult classes, where accent reduction is a lost cause (179). He further warned that conventional methods of education, employing an autocratic instructor and passive students, are guaranteed to fail with adults (240; we have since learned that they do not succeed with children either). Inadequate facilities, lack of state funding, poor programs, an absence of standards for determining literacy, and the difficulties of attending school after work led to adult dropout rates of 50 to 80 percent (Miller 1916, 99; Thompson 1920, 68).

The whole concept of English as a Second Language was a new one in education in the period 1900—1920 (Howatt 1984, 212). What few language-learning experts there were at the time disagreed over the validity of the few methodologies that had been developed. Educators generally favored the newer, more “direct” methods of English instruction, which relied entirely on oral English, coupled with pantomime where necessary, rather than the older, indirect method that focused on the translation of written language. Indirect instruction employed the student’s native language to explain matters, and involved both paradigm practice and the memorization of vocabulary lists. According to Lillian P. Clark (1924, 2), the direct method, which is English-only, “associates objects and actions with the English symbols immediately, without the interpretation or translation of the English words into any other language.” The Berlitz
question-and-answer system, intended by its deviser to be teacher-proof, proved a
popular direct method of instruction, as did François Gouin’s attempt to mimic for
second-language instruction the way in which children learn their native language. Both
focused on the acquisition of practical conversational skills through dialogues involving
everyday situations.

George Elmore Reaman (1921) sought to ground English instruction in “the
essential core of language,” recommending the study of sign language, ways in which
foreigners make their wants known without English, and methods of teaching foreign
languages. Peter Roberts, an educator working for the YMCA, wrote a more popular
series of textbooks on teaching English to immigrant adults. Roberts opposed
compulsory English for adults as un-American, noting that many immigrants had already
been compelled to learn foreign tongues in Europe (1920, 89; in contrast to his distaste
for “Prussianism” for adults, Roberts approved of compulsory English for children).
Roberts adopted Gouin’s method, designed to imitate natural mother-tongue acquisition
but using subject matter appropriate for adult learners. Roberts’s system, some thirty
lessons divided among home, work, and “business life,” promised to teach a base of
seven hundred to one thousand words, which is, according to Roberts, “a larger stock
than most men in the common walks of life use.”* Roberts conceived of language
learning as a logical (though unconscious) process, and he advocated a conversational, or
aural/oral method, avoiding textbooks, spelling, or instruction in grammar. According to
Roberts, “Grammar lessons in an abstract form will drive away any body of men” (41),
and he concentrated instead on building up associations of ideas and establishing logical
connections between successive sentences.

The Roberts method sounds appealing, though in practice it strangles on a
progression of simple sentences and simplistic ideas painfully broken down into
component parts, and it is accompanied by the very drill Roberts claimed to avoid: “No
lesson should be given the pupils without its corresponding grammar practice” (81),
which includes pronoun paradigms and rings such sentential changes as:

I am getting warm.
You are getting warm.
He is getting warm.
We are getting warm.
You are getting warm.
They are getting warm. (69)
Present-tense dialogues may be repeated later in the future tense:
Tomorrow, the miner will go underground.
Tomorrow, the miner will take a match.
Tomorrow, the miner will strike a match.
Tomorrow, the match will be lighted. (83)

And although Roberts was criticized by his contemporaries for his optimistic stance on
the new immigration, he advised teachers to “take account of race psychology” and to
divide classes by sex (1920, 94—95). Moreover, he told his instructors that the Italians,
Slavs, Hindus, Chinese and Japanese students they would encounter suffered from “a
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heritage of inefficiency and sloth” which would prove difficult to overcome ([1912] 1918, 100).

In 1920 P. P. Claxton, secretary of the interior and commissioner of education, reported that more than 95 percent of the American population could speak English. But he regarded the remaining 5 percent as a danger to the public peace, and for them Claxton recommended the Goldberger method of teaching English to adults (Goldberger 1920, 5). Although the Bureau of Education encouraged states to adopt laws similar to the New York statute which required everyone under twenty-one years of age to demonstrate a fifth-grade level of English literacy (Massachusetts had recently raised its requirement even higher, to a sixth-grade level), Henry Goldberger, a New York City public school principal and an ESL instructor at Columbia Teachers College, rejected the idea of compulsory English. The short pamphlet on ESL that he prepared for the Bureau of Education recommended English clubs rather than classes for adults to make the communication situation more realistic. The content of Goldberger’s English lessons was pragmatic: “Teach to-day such English as the pupil can use at once” (11). This practical English includes “name, address, occupation, greetings, salutations, farewells, inquiries, showing gratitude, . . . age, weight, illness, good health, pain, hunger and thirst,” as well as words about “buying, selling, repairing, cooking,” technical terms on the job, household terms, and local and national holidays.

In grouping students Goldberger warned teachers to prevent the formation of “national cliques” which would delay the work of Americanization. Though he conceded that a teacher’s knowledge of the students’ language could be helpful, Goldberger, like Roberts, recommended the direct method of instruction, the employment of English to teach English. He rejected the synthetic, or one-word-at-a-time, method (“This is a hat, this is a book”), the declension of pronouns and the conjugation of verbs (“I walk, thou walkest, he walks, we walk, you walk, they walk”), and any other form of mechanical drill in favor of Gouin’s analytic method favoring spoken language. Goldberger recommended the construction of “themes” of ten short sentences illustrating an action or goal, for example, opening a door or visiting a doctor, to be accompanied by a pantomime on the part of the instructor. He also advised a catechetical conversation, wherein the teacher asks questions and students provide simple answers (“With whom do you board? How many children have you?”). Students were encouraged to act out short dialogues about buying something, asking directions, opening a bank account, testifying in court (17—18). The forty-six-page booklet contains short monologues illustrating a day in the life of the immigrant: washing hands, making a fire in a stove, eating breakfast, going to work, eating lunch, shopping, eating supper, and going to bed. Like Roberts’s examples, those of Goldberger suffer from syntactic atomization. Linguistic simplicity, carried to an extreme in the ESL classroom, is pedagogically deadly. (Similarly, researchers on reading methodology have found, to no one’s surprise, that school reading texts for children are often ineffective because their language is so simplistic as to be utterly without interest.) The lack of drama the Goldberger dialogues create as they are acted out by instructor and students will drive away any body of men and women.

Ironically, a more modern, workable method of ESL instruction was available as early as 1899, with the publication of Henry Sweet’s Practical Study of Languages, which rejected the osmotic process of the “direct” method in favor of graded lessons in phonology and the development of oral competency. Though it led to Otto Jespersen’s
How to Teach a Foreign Language (1904) and Harold Palmer’s work on language teaching in England, it was ignored at the time by American schools, perhaps because of its British origins, and perhaps, as well, because it lacked an ideological grounding in Americanism (Allen 1973, 298; Howatt 1984, 213).

It would seem that such an ideological grounding for the ESL curriculum was more important than its actual effectiveness, a situation that has not changed today. For some critics of Americanization, like Henry Pratt Fairchild, learning English was not enough. For him, assimilation was spiritual and intellectual, not simply linguistic. The title of one of Fairchild’s books—The Melting-Pot Mistake (1926)—reveals his negative attitude toward newcomers. A believer in the Nordic origins of the English, and therefore the American, race, who worried about pollution of the national “germ plasm” by aliens, Fairchild claimed that the schools, rather than serving as agents of Americanization, had become de-Americanized by “the insupportable burden of foreignness that has been laid upon them.” He blamed both immigrant children and the “large proportion of the teachers [who] are only partly Americanized” as the chief causes in “the breakdown of the American public-school system” (234-35). While Fairchild’s views seem extreme in retrospect, they do reflect a common fear that the teaching ranks might become polluted. The more moderate Steiner simply urged that “no teacher ought to be employed in our schools who does not speak English contagiously well” (1916b, 106).

While the scholars debated whether it was necessary for instructors to know the language of their students, school authorities turned Fairchild’s advice into policy, moving to keep immigrants and bilinguals out of the teaching ranks by placing greater emphasis on accent in the testing and licensing of prospective teachers. Required speech courses were used to steer Chinese American elementary education majors away from teaching in California; those who did pass the speech test were frequently not permitted to teach Anglo children (Low 1982, 165-66; 178). In one extreme case, a 1925 Tennessee law required that all teachers from the university level on down to the kindergarten be citizens, and required those employed to teach white pupils to be native-born whites (Foreign Language Information Service 1940). As a result of these efforts to homogenize the language of the teaching corps, schoolteachers remained by and large monolingual English speakers untrained in any methodology to teach English to nonanglophones and unable to empathize with the nonanglophone student. Those teachers who did read up on ESL theory often opted for an eclectic approach, using a bit of everything, both direct and indirect. As recently as the 1950s, little special preparation was required for teachers of what New York City called “English to the foreign born,” and even today one of the biggest complaints about both ESL and bilingual education is the inadequate methods training of classroom teachers. Indeed, one “methodology” that is still current goes so far as to claim that ESL training is unnecessary for teaching children or adults. A version of what is now called immersion, or the sink-or-swim approach to English, it suggests that nonanglophones merely need the chance to listen to a native speaker in order to pick up English. After all, it is argued, children are adaptable when it comes to language learning. So high an authority on language education as the United States Supreme Court affirmed this in Meyer v. Nebraska, stating that childhood is the best time to acquire a second tongue.

The immersion method is popular in both day and evening schools because it is traditional—the first attempts at ESL in American schools early in this century used a
monolingual English approach, provided little in the way of translation on the part of teachers (though bilingual students often translated for their classmates), and introduced grammar through the rote practice of paradigms and sentence patterns (Howatt 1984, 213). Immersion is also popular with the schools because it is both cheap and administratively convenient. Immersion can be accomplished without separate classes for children or specialist instructors for either children or adults. One San Francisco newspaper columnist, a vocal supporter of English-first, recently suggested that since immigrants do not need to learn perfect English, untrained volunteers would make the most suitable English teachers: unlike professional instructors, volunteers would not “get hung up on grammar rules and stuff like that” and they would cost less than regular teachers to boot (Wright 1986).

While inadequate instruction is only one of many factors contributing to the high dropout rates of adults from English classes earlier in this century, it is likely that the high dropout rate among immigrant children reported by Greer must be attributed in large part to the failure of the schools to provide nonanglophones with ESL or bilingual education of any sort. For children with little or no English, immersion virtually guarantees that they will fall behind in skills development and content areas as they either struggle to keep up with what is said, or withdraw into a world of their own. The psychologist Kenji Hakuta (1985, 225) deflates the myth that children are sponges waiting to soak up language: “Children are not the instantaneous second-language learners painted in our folklore, and . . . it may take them even longer to learn the kinds of language necessary to perform well in school.”

However, Paulston (1981, 476) finds that language acquisition, or the lack thereof, is a function of complex social factors, and the school’s role in the process is therefore a limited one, even under the best of circumstances. In view of this, the fact that many children did acquire English—probably on the streets and schoolyards, and on the job, rather than in the classrooms through formal lessons and interaction with instructors in overcrowded urban classrooms—would seem to be more a tribute to their own intelligence and initiative than it is to the educational system that virtually ignored their presence.

**Crime and Punishment**

One standard method of inculcating English-first in American schools has been to suppress the students’ native tongue, punishing them for using the wrong language. The method may be as old as language instruction itself. By the seventeenth century, according to the Newbolt Report on English in the British school system (1921), schools in Great Britain were so thoroughly committed to a classics curriculum with Latin and Greek as the languages of instruction that the use of English on school grounds was proscribed: “It is a usual custom in schools to appoint Custodes [‘spies’] or Asini [‘dunces’] to observe and catch them who speak English in each form.” Those so caught could transfer the opprobrium of the dunce cap by catching another student using the vernacular (John Brinsley, Ludus Literarius [1627], cited in Newbolt 1921, 37–38; the report adds that the practice was still common at Eton in the late nineteenth century).

Similarly, nineteenth-century French schools, under orders to spread the national language to that half of France which was still not francophone, took to the task
aggressively, using the same methods and punishments to enforce French that the
eighteenth-century Jesuits had used to make their charges speak Latin (Weber 1976, 457).
In the 1890s children caught using Breton were “put on dry bread and water or sent to
clean out the school latrine,” or they were made to wear a “token of shame,” which
Jesuits had formerly used to enforce Latin on French-speaking students (313). The
French army picked up where the schools left off, on one occasion canceling all leaves in
a Quimper barracks when some soldiers were heard speaking Breton (83n).

Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (1984, 309—10) labels as violent the requirement that
some minority-language speakers, for example Lapps in Norway, Finns in Sweden,
Kurds in Turkey, and Native Americans in the United States, attend centralized
assimilation schools that isolate children from their families and exterminate their native
culture and language. (In contrast, majority-language boarding schools reinforce home
traditions.) She further describes Finnish and Welsh children punished for using their
home languages by being made to carry heavy loads or wear collars that restrain head
movement. (In 1846 Welsh was allowed in classrooms only as a vehicle for teaching
English; it was banned completely between 1871 and 1939, since which time it has been
permitted again [Wardhaugh 1987, 84].)

American schools were equally zealous to convert everyone to English. When the
United States took the Philippines from Spain in 1898, it imposed English in the schools,
together with the practise of suspending students or lowering their grades for using a non-
English language (Ruppenthal 1919, 660; Smolicz 1986, 99). A similar English-only
policy applied for a time in Puerto Rico, which was acquired through conquest at the
same time, though Spanish was eventually reinstated there as the language of primary
school instruction. From 1859 on, the city of San Francisco forced its Chinese residents
to attend segregated Chinese-only schools, where the Chinese language was forbidden. A
Chinese American teacher reports of her own experience attending one of these schools
in the 1940s: “Most of the teachers penalized us for speaking our home language. If they
called us speaking Chinese to each other, even during our recess time, we were
penalized—our privilege taken away” (Low 1982, 172).

Native American schools run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs had for many years
the goal of “breaking up the use of Indian dialects, and the substitution therefore of the
English language” (Morgan n.d., 13). In 1887 the BIA announced: “Instruction of
Indians in the vernacular is not only of no use to them but is detrimental to the cause of
education and civilization and will not be permitted in any Indian school... The
impracticability, if not impossibility of civilizing Indians of this country in any other
tongue but our own would seem obvious” (cited in Forbes and Lemos 1981, 139).

It was the policy of the BIA to employ only English-speaking teachers who were
charged with the task of assimilating Indian children into white society. As one tactic of
assimilation, Native American children were punished—they were beaten or had their
mouths washed out with soap—if they lapsed into Navajo or Hopi or Cherokee at the
boarding schools many of them were forced to attend by a government which at times
withheld food from parents who wanted to keep their children at home (Castellanos 1983,
30; Report on Indian Education 1976, 7; English Language Constitutional Amendments
1989, 96). In 1928 the Merriam Report shifted the BIA focus away from deracination,
encouraging the support of tribal languages (Allen 1973, 313), but English remained the
language of instruction and punishments continued (Crawford 1989, 26). The 1951
Bureau of Indian Affairs manual stressed the importance of English in the schools but suggested the beginning of a reversal of its long-held English-only policy: because “language expression is essential to the development of thought, the use of native languages by Indian children may not be forbidden.” Nonetheless, the BIA was slow in implementing bilingual education (Report 1976, 122). Punishment for using Indian languages was common in the Canadian Yukon as well.

Until the late 1960s many schools in the American Southwest, which was originally settled by Hispanics and forcibly annexed to the United States, forbade the use of Spanish. Punishments included writing several pages of “I must not speak Spanish in school” and standing on “the ‘black square’ for an hour or so,” as well as fines, suspension, “Spanish detention,” paddling, and even expulsion (Carter and Segura 1979, 184–88).

This policy of active minority-language suppression does not encourage linguistic assimilation, and probably was never meant to. It did not turn young English gentlemen into fluent speakers of Latin and Greek, though it taught many of them to respect and fear the magisterial languages and ultimately to reject them. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, after some one hundred years of French-only school laws, French remained a foreign language for half that country’s citizens and 25 percent of them spoke no French at all (Weber 1976, 67–70). Although the percentage has improved, regional variation and local languages remain strong in many parts of France.

**Linguistic Colonialism in Puerto Rico**

The United States did no better in its attempts to anglify its non-English speaking possessions. Puerto Rico was occupied by American forces in 1898 during the Spanish-American War and became a possession of the United States. In 1900 the Organic Act passed by the U.S. Congress conferred American citizenship to all born on the island. In 1899 Victor S. Clark, the interim director of Puerto Rican schools, recommended that English replace Spanish as the language of instruction. Defending his action, Clark, who was initially blind to local realities, claimed to find no language loyalty among Puerto Rico’s Hispanics. Confronted with an island illiteracy rate of 90 percent and a variety of Spanish that he considered a patois with “little value as an intellectual medium,” Clark maintained that it would be just as easy to teach the Puerto Ricans English as it would be to set up schools teaching standard Castilian Spanish (Osuna 1949, 342).

However, this and subsequent American attempts to anglify Puerto Rico show that school language policy cannot be effectively driven by political or ideological desires. Clark was quickly forced to admit his mistake, acknowledging that Spanish had “a tenacious hold upon popular sympathy” (342). He then advocated teaching both Spanish and English, in order to preserve Spanish on the island. This initial policy of bilingualism was supported as well by Martin Brumbaugh, commissioner of education for Puerto Rico (1900–1903). Brumbaugh’s successors, however, sought to place the island’s schools on an English-only basis as quickly as possible, and in 1903 English became the official language of instruction for all subjects (except Spanish) and at all levels, though the shift to all-English classrooms was carried out gradually, as staff could be trained to teach English (Osuna 344–45).
Attempts to substitute English for Spanish at the elementary level in Puerto Rican schools proved to have limited success, in part because “no scientific approach to the teaching of English had been yet devised” (347). The English of the teaching staff was often weak, particularly in rural areas. Reporting on the complete failure to instill English in the Puerto Rican population after seventeen years of bilingual schooling, José Padín (1916, 16), general superintendent of the Puerto Rican schools, commented:

While it is true that our eighth-grade pupils are able to understand simple oral and written English, there is overwhelming evidence to show that they are totally deficient in English composition; that they do not have a grasp on the structure of the language; that they are singularly weak in the fundamental characteristics of English speech; and that, in general, their knowledge of English or, rather, their lack of knowledge, is an altogether inadequate return for the amount of time and effort devoted to the acquisition of the language.

To remedy the situation, Padín recommended emphasizing spoken and written English instead of English reading. Because the Puerto Rican eighth graders tested in Padín’s survey inflected adjectives and made the sorts of errors in idiom, noun plurals, pronoun forms, and verb tenses that were typical of non-native speakers, he recommended the use of textbooks emphasizing correction of the linguistic errors made not by mainland children, but by second-language learners. And Padín advised using Spanish as a medium to explain English to the students (23-24; the use of Spanish to teach English was proscribed at the time, no doubt because the English-only method was so strongly advocated for teaching adult learners on the mainland).

Padín’s work led to the adoption in 1917 of Spanish as the language of instruction in the first four grades in Puerto Rican schools. English was introduced as a special subject and became the general language of instruction in grade six. However, even this plan proved ineffective, partly because many teachers did not know enough English to carry it out, and partly due to the high early dropout rate: few children, particularly in the countryside, stayed in school beyond the third grade. Nor did the transitional plan meet with the approval of mainland American politicians, who were convinced that the only way to Americanize Puerto Rico was through the medium of English, and the sooner, the better. They repeatedly scolded island authorities for their failure to oust the Spanish “patois” and spread what the British once called the American patois.

While a 1926 study conducted by Columbia University recommended removing English entirely from the early grades, a 1928 study by Victor Clark, sponsored by the Brookings Institution, urged the retention of English in the elementary curriculum to prevent that language from becoming the exclusive property of the privileged classes. There was an ideological as well as a social aim in Clark’s proposal, revealing his continuing prejudice against Puerto Rican language and culture: “English is the chief source, practically the only source, of democratic ideas in Puerto Rico” (Osuna 1949, 363).

In 1937 President Franklin Roosevelt expressed his disappointment that after nearly forty years of American rule, the people of Puerto Rico had little or no knowledge of “the language of our nation.” Instructing Dr. José M. Gallardo, his newly appointed commissioner of education for Puerto Rico, that English must be taught on the island “with vigor, purposefulness and devotion, and with the understanding that English is the official language of our country,” the president echoed the common notion that English was essential for understanding the American way: “Only through the acquisition of this
language will Puerto Rican Americans secure a better understanding of American ideals and principles” (Roosevelt 1941). But even Gallardo, with a presidential mandate to convert the natives, found it necessary to stress Spanish as the language of instruction, with English as a specific subject in the first six grades, a policy that provoked displeasure in Washington (Osuna 1949, 381-83).

During hearings of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Territories and Insular Affairs held in San Juan in 1943, senators complained in a manner reminiscent of earlier hearings on New Mexico statehood that they could not make themselves understood on the island. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, referring to the Senate committee hearings, expressed his disappointment over the failure of efforts to promote English in Puerto Rico. Ickes insisted that “practical bilingualism is desirable and can be achieved” (Osuna 391), a statement which is easier for a politician than an educator to make. Language experts were predictably pessimistic about converting Puerto Rico to English. Using the ever—present example of Quebec, Gallardo pointed out that bilingualism could only be achieved in a bilingual environment, whereas in Puerto Rico students were exposed to English only in school (Osuna 385-86). Algernon Coleman, a professor of French at the University of Chicago, surveyed the state of English education in Puerto Rico in 1939 and found no progress during the years of American rule, partly because English instruction was not based on any sound educational theory and partly because of “the small number of opportunities that most Porto Ricans have for speaking English in any continuous fashion as a genuine vehicle of intercourse with others” (Osuna 392-94). Coleman rejected the likelihood of bilingualism, suggesting instead that English be promoted as a supplementary language. Unfortunately, Coleman noted, teachers aiming at realizable goals are criticized as anti-American “by persons who look upon the teaching of English from other than an educational point of view” (395).

Language in Puerto Rico has always been more a political issue than an educational one, tied up with issues of statehood or independence, cultural pluralism and Americanization. With no clear solution to the political problem in sight, observers are tempted to describe the language problem as hopeless. Even as late as 1961, we find continuing echoes of Victor Clark’s initial misjudgment of linguistic conditions in Puerto Rico: Joseph Matluck complains that because of competition from English, standard Spanish in Puerto Rico has few norms, nor do Puerto Ricans feel they need them; consequently, “there is no linguistic consciousness whatsoever in the schools, without which it is impossible to fight the pressure of English and the progressive deterioration of Spanish syntax on the Island” (cited in Poplack 1982, 4).

Principles of Exclusion

The policy of English-first failed in Puerto Rico, nor does an exclusive official-language policy seem likely to succeed in mainland classrooms. The ill treatment of one group of nonanglophones by the San Francisco schools led to an upheaval that has polarized the nation on the question of students’ right of access to the majority language, English, and their right or desire to maintain their minority language as well. Victor Low (1982, 25) traces the state of California’s systematic attempts to deny its Chinese population the benefits of education. San Francisco School Superintendent John Pelton was ignored when he called for bilingual education for Chinese students as early as 1867. Pelton also
favored teaching Chinese to Americans for the purposes of establishing trade with the East, but his recommendations were rejected for more than a century. When their right to schooling was finally acknowledged in court (Tape v. Hurley, 66 Cal. Reports 473 [1885]), the Chinese children of San Francisco were segregated in their own institutions and not allowed to attend neighborhood schools. Not until 1929 did the city’s Chinese schools shift from de jure segregation to a system of de facto segregation based on neighborhood population patterns.

While it denied Chinese schoolchildren the full benefits of an education, San Francisco also did what it could to discourage the Chinese graduates of its schools from returning as teachers or administrators. They were systematically failed in the college speech classes necessary for teacher certification on the grounds that their supposed Chinese accents evidenced a generally inadequate command of English. One result of this segregationist and discriminatory treatment has been self-fulfilling: the existence of a class of Chinese-American students in San Francisco schools with limited English-speaking ability. (Conklin and Lourie 1983, 38, report that the Chinese in general are strongly language-retentive, estimating that in 1970 some three-fourths of Boston’s Chinese population spoke little or no English; while this phenomenon may be cultural in part, it is no doubt affected by the frequent, externally imposed isolation of Chinese Americans from the mainstream of society.)

In the 1970s the failure of the San Francisco schools to provide an English education to its Chinese pupils reached the attention of the United States Supreme Court. Lau v. Nichols (414 US Reports 563 [1974]) was a class action suit brought by the guardian of Kinney Kinmon Lau on behalf of the more than eighteen hundred non-English-speaking Chinese American students of the San Francisco Unified School District, alleging violation of the students’ rights under the Fourteenth Amendment. The U.S. government filed an amicus curiae brief in favor of the plaintiff. Despite California’s policy to insure that all students master English and to require such mastery for high school graduation, these students were not receiving any supplemental English instruction. In essence, though they were attending school, they were being given no education at all. The United States Supreme Court agreed. In its opinion supporting Lau the court observed: “Students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education. . . . We know that those who do not understand English are certain to find their classroom experience wholly incomprehensible and in no way meaningful.”

According to Reynaldo F. Macías (1979), since language rights are not fundamental rights according to the U.S. Constitution, and the class of non-English-speakers is considered too vague by the courts, in order for legal action to be effective, it must link language discrimination to the loss of a fundamental right that the courts do recognize. The courts have been more ready to act on discrimination in voting or in the criminal justice system. They have also accepted cases involving discrimination on the basis of national or racial origin. As a result, many language discrimination cases are filed under the equal protection guarantee of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Lau v. Nichols, like Meyer v. Nebraska, was argued as an abridgement of equal protection, but as it had done in 1923, the Supreme Court again sidestepped the constitutional issue of protection for official or minority languages. Instead, it decided for Lau on the basis of section 601 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (42 USC sec. 2000d).
In 1970 the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, which held that ignoring the needs of non-English-speaking groups was a form of national-origin discrimination, had ordered school districts receiving federal funds to rectify the language deficiencies of students speaking little or no English. In the Lau decision, the court found that the provisions of this law had not been upheld: “It seems obvious that the Chines-speaking minority receive fewer benefits than the English-speaking majority from respondents’ school system which denies them a meaningful opportunity to participate in the educational program—all earmarks of the discrimination banned by the regulations.”

Finding discrimination, the court ordered the San Francisco school district to change its ways. However, the petitioners did not ask for, nor did the court prescribe, any specific remedies for San Francisco schools to adopt, though the court listed as two possible options either the teaching of English to these Chinese students, or direct instruction in Chinese, while allowing that other acceptable solutions might also be possible. As such, the court created no language rights for the plaintiffs (Macías 1979, 92). The court did require the San Francisco school district to come up with a plan to integrate its non-English speaking students into its schools, and the result has been the so-called Lau remedies, most of them centering on some sort of transitional bilingual education program. In addition, the doctrine that inattention to the educational needs of nonanglophones constitutes discrimination on the basis of national origin is now part of federal law (20 U.S.C.A. 1703[f]), applying to all districts, not just those receiving federal funds (Macías 1979, 92–93).

Since 1974 many school districts have entered into agreements with the federal government and applied for federal funds to implement such programs for speakers of Chinese, Spanish, and other minority languages. The court has warned that while it is permissible in bilingual programs to isolate non-English-speaking students in separate classes, such programs should not be used as a means of permanent segregation, and students must be continually evaluated to determine when they are ready to be mainstreamed with the rest of the school population.

However, few bilingual programs have been adequately funded or staffed by trained teachers. Students are often placed in such programs inappropriately (for example, on the basis of having a Hispanic-sounding last name, rather than on linguistic ability), and student progress is often inadequately monitored. Bilingual programs have acquired the stigma of remedial education, though they are certainly not remedial in theory. And they are often regarded as controversial even among educators. Confusion over the purposes and implementation of bilingual education has clearly added fuel to the present official-English drive as well: many people, including some minority-language activists, suspect bilingual programs of being minority-language maintenance rather than transitional ESL efforts.

Ironically, the arguments in favor of bilingual education gain support from arguments favoring vernacular over classical education. In the face of an educational tradition dominated by Latin and Greek, English had to fight to establish itself as the language of instruction in British and American schools. John Locke ([1694] 1705) advocated an English education for those students destined for trade, as opposed to higher callings, and Benjamin Franklin established an English School in Philadelphia, also designed to be practical or vocational in nature. Noah Webster (1790, 7) distinctly favored an English education over a classical one: “If children are to acquire ideas, it is
certainly easier to obtain them in a language which they understand, than in a foreign tongue.” Just as today’s teachers have found that many children whose dominant language is not English are often academically incompetent in two languages, both English and their native tongue, Webster also recognized that academic competence in one’s first language must be firmly established before going on to a second language: “We often see young persons . . . puzzling their heads with French, when they can hardly write two sentences of good English” (7).

Today’s monolingual English schools, like those of 1890 or 1940, present a stern, impenetrable barrier for the nonanglophone, resulting in continued low achievement and high dropout rates. Even otherwise enlightened schools prefer to avoid language issues if at all possible. They continue to deal with the language problem by ignoring it. Thus a local, private preschool in Urbana, Illinois, catering to the children of university faculty and international graduate students accepts no more than four non-English-speaking children per class and requires these nonanglophone children to speak only English during school hours. Of course, the public schools do observe federal guidelines, but although ESL or bilingual programs exist in the schools, I have seen nonanglophone children mainstreamed and ignored here as well.

While they have had over a century to deal with the presence of non-English speakers in anglophone classrooms, American schools are not entirely to blame in failing to deal adequately with non-English-speaking pupils. Language teaching methodologies were virtually nonexistent in American schools until the early twentieth century, and although they have made rapid strides, particularly since World War II, no single method of teaching English as a second language has emerged triumphant. Moreover, psychologists until recently believed that immigrant and other non-English speakers were mentally inferior to home-grown, anglophone Americans, and that bilinguals—in particular, first-generation Americans speaking a native language and learning English as well—suffered intellectual handicaps from having to think in two languages. Since students tend to achieve at levels anticipated in advance by their instructors—a phenomenon known as the Pygmalion effect—teachers who expected immigrant children to perform poorly in their classes more often than not found their predictions fulfilled. And more often than not, the victim was not only blamed, but punished as well: the dropout rates of nonanglophone schoolchildren have always been unacceptably high.

For those who stayed on, American schools further inhibited assimilation by either ignoring nonanglophone students, sending them for speech therapy or remediation, or placing them into the inaptly named vocational tracks—long the dumping ground for students judged unable to handle intellectual tasks—or even worse, into classes for the educationally handicapped. That bilingual classes have become such dumping grounds as well may be signaled by reports of their failure. Calvin Veltman (1983, 380-81) reports that bilingual education programs reduce achievements of both English-mother-tongue and minority-mother-tongue children. He adds that if “the goal of MLE [minority-language education] programs is to equalize educational opportunity by permitting minority-language children to begin their formal education in a more familiar language, the data indicate that the opposite is in fact the result.” Sandra McKay (1988, 341; 347) reports a 50 to 100 percent dropout rate in elementary school language submersion programs; she further indicates that 26 percent of bilingual programs for first graders are in fact English-only.
It is painful to realize that American public schools refused to cater to the needs of nonanglophone children until recently, when court rulings and federal legislation forced them to deal with the issue, and it is discouraging to observe that even after the need for formal language instruction has become clear to educationists, many schools continue to resent and resist providing their clients—the students—with what those clients need and want, an education. However, we cannot expect the schools to solve the language problem singlehandedly. It is also a painful irony that when the schools ignored the existence of nonanglophone students, they were universally credited with Americanizing generations of immigrants, while now, as schools finally struggle with the formal teaching of English to non-English speakers, they are bitterly attacked for failing no matter what method they try or how genuine their intention to succeed.