

Exploring American Language Policy towards Immigrants in the 1980s and 90s from the Perspective of Cultural Hegemony Theory

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Abstract:

This essay, based on Antonio Gramsci's Cultural Hegemony theory, elaborates that the change of language policy towards Hispanic and Asian immigrants in the late twentieth century is far from an issue merely concerning language and education. Considering the domestic and overseas crises encountered by the United States in the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, it is not difficult to see that the dominant group was eager to maintain their socioeconomic status and restore traditional values and law and order. Such essential concepts in cultural hegemony as civil society, intellectuals, and consent will be used to show how the dominant group, employing language as a manipulative tool to achieve hegemonic control and to maintain their dominant power.

Keywords: language policy; English; Hispanic and Asian immigrants; cultural hegemony

The United States was challenged by crises both at home and abroad in the 1960s and 1970s, when all the turbulence, discontent, and violence seemed to be coming together. Social upheavals and economic recession during this period stirred American society up and reversed traditional values and order. Among all the changes, what is most noticeable is the Civil Rights movement, which led to the passage of two important bills: Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. Inspired by African Americans' fighting for their legal rights, other minorities, including women and homosexuals, demanded greater equality for themselves.

In addition, with criticism of escalating American involvement in Vietnam mounted, more and more young people grew disillusioned with the government and other institutional bastions of the status quo. By the mid-1960s a full-fledged youth revolt, labeled as "counterculture", had broken out on campuses across the country. To make matters worse, the economy in the late 20th century was heading for trouble, with the characteristics of high rate of inflation and unemployment. Medicare, education, housing, and other Great Society programs raised the domestic budget sharply too. The American economy was further staggered by energy crisis, which was caused by OPEC's boycott of oil sales. Under these circumstances, it was obvious that America's traditional values and sense of superiority were under attack. Those in power were eager to maintain their dominant socioeconomic status and restore traditional values and law and order.

In the 1980s, in view of a large influx of immigrants from Latin and Asian countries, efforts were made to establish English as the sole official language of the United States by legislation. To that end, bilingual services were to be restricted, and English was encouraged in both public and private sectors. Language is often used as a manipulative tool employed by the dominant group to achieve hegemonic control over the dominated group. What is hegemony? What is the relationship between language and hegemonic control? The following part will give an overview of Gramsci's cultural hegemony theory to explore the relationship between language and hegemony.

1. Language and Cultural Hegemony

The concept of hegemony was developed and advanced by the Italian activist and Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). His concern was to understand how social groups organize their rule and, more pressingly for him, why there had been no proletarian revolution. Rule for Gramsci was hegemony armored with coercion (Baldwin, 2005).

The power of the ruling class, or class fraction over others, was partly exercised through the state. It was not simply a case of dominance through sanctions, punishments or inducements; it also involved "intellectual and moral leadership" (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 182, 269). Besides the coercive use or threat of force via the military and the police, rule, for Gramsci, also involves intellectual and moral leadership, which includes the organization of consent based upon establishing the legitimacy of leadership and developing shared ideas, values, beliefs and meanings—a shared culture. If the dominated groups accept the norms and values of the dominant group willingly and actively, a steady rule can be set up and maintained. Gramsci initially combined culture with hegemony. Cultural hegemony, which is obtained through promoting a shared culture, is crucial to achieve political hegemony.

Language, as the carrier of culture, plays a significant role in Gramsci's cultural hegemony theory. However, language is not merely a tool to move ideas from one head to another, but rather is connected to an understanding of the world and the role of speakers within it. Thus, language cannot be separated from the culture, society and history of its users.

If it is true that every language contains the elements of a conception of the world and of a culture, it could also be true that from anyone's language, one can assess the greater or lesser complexity of his conception of the world (Gramsci, 1971).

Therefore, one of the effective ways for the dominant group to disseminate its world view and ideology¹ is through promulgating its dominant language. If the dominated groups accept the language of the dominant group, they will be gradually influenced by the norms and values of the dominant group, and finally accept them as "common sense" and "natural." In this process, cultural hegemony takes place. In the next part, such essential concepts in cultural hegemony as civil society, intellectuals, consent will be discussed with the case study of American language policy towards Hispanic and Asian immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s.

2. Using Institutions of "Civil Society"

According to Gramsci, State is composed of political society and civil society. In *Prison Notebooks*, he wrote:

What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural "levels": the one that can be called "civil society", that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called "private", and that of "political society" or "the State". These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of "hegemony" which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of "direct domination" or command exercised through the State and "juridical" government (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12).

Unlike the political society or the state, which exercised "direct domination" or coercion over society, the dominant group used the institutions of civil society to mobilize popular consent in favor of the prevailing economic order and to establish "cultural and spiritual supremacy" or "hegemony." Thus, a steady rule could be guaranteed by hegemony protected by the armor of coercion. Gramsci (1971) used a vivid metaphor in his *Prison Notebooks*: "the State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks" (p. 238). The fortresses and earthworks mentioned here refer to civil society. In a word, civil society is constituted by affiliations outside of formal state boundaries, including the family, social clubs, schools, the press, leisure activities etc. Civil society is a platform where cultural hegemony takes place.

In the late twentieth century, the dominant group highlighted the status of English through organizations, schools, media, etc., which fell into the category of civil society defined by Gramsci. More and more schools reduced the learning of immigrant children's native tongue and preferred English Immersion approach. U.S. English and other similar organizations worked to restrict the use of languages other than English in both public and private sectors and excluded bilingual education. On top of all that, stories of alleged failure of bilingual education and job promotion, due to improvement of English proficiency, flooded all kinds of media. For example, *New York Times* published articles in favor of English as the official language of the United States. A writer, who was Estonian-born, naturalized citizen stated, "...observations over the years, has led me to question the motives of the people who are against English as our common language. Do they want a segment of our population to remain second-class citizens" (Cannon, 1995, A22)? Another writer expressed quite explicitly: "Nearly three decades of linguistic welfare have discouraged new Americans from learning English and barred their access to the American dream" (King, 1995, A18). Similar views also found in *San Francisco Chronicle*. Articles state that immigrants are well aware that they need to learn English, and that largely they do. One article reports that "Representative Ed Pastor...said that generations of immigrants have understood that learning English is vital to succeed. Pastor noted that more than 95% of Americans speak English" ("Designating English," 1995, A6). Altogether, they convey such a message that success would follow learning English since "English is the language of opportunity" (Ibid).

These institutions of civil society play a significant role in educating the masses and helping the dominant group to carry out cultural hegemony. Gradually, the masses will be influenced by these institutions and agree to the message that the dominant group intends to transmit: English is superior to other languages and should be advocated. Moreover, language and culture are correlated with each other. Language is not just the carrier of culture but also is a part of culture. Language helps mould our way of thinking and, consequently, by imposing the dominant language, the dominant group can spread their world view and ideology to the dominated group. Finally, they will accept the norms and values of the dominant group as "common sense" and "natural." In this way, the dominant group can control and conduct the life and thought of the dominated group and maintain the socioeconomic order which is favorable to the dominant group.

¹For Gramsci ideology is grasped as ideas, meanings and practices which, while they purport to be universal truths, are maps of meaning that support the power of particular social classes (Barker, 2004).

In a word, through promoting English and educating the masses, the dominant group can promulgate its own ideology and morality within civil society so that they can set up and maintain a steady rule. The carry out of cultural hegemony needs the help of a group of people, who are defined as intellectuals.

3. With the Help of “Intellectuals”

According to Gramsci (1971), cultural hegemony is carried out by “intellectuals.” Intellectuals are to be defined in a certain social relationship, as Gramsci notes: “All men are intellectuals, but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals” (p. 9). The intellectuals are the dominant group’s “deputies” exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government (p. 12).

Intellectuals in the functional sense fall into two groups: “traditional” intellectuals and “organic” intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971, p. 3). “Traditional” intellectuals are those persons who fill the scientific, literary, philosophical and religious positions in society. This would include those working in universities, schools, churches, the media, publishers and law firms etc. Though traditional intellectuals may be drawn from different class backgrounds, their status, position and functions lead them to view themselves as independent of any class allegiances or ideological role. However, for Gramsci, they produce, maintain and circulate those ideologies constitutive of ruling class cultural hegemony. By contrast, “organic” intellectuals are said to be a constitutive part of the working-class struggle. They are said to be the thinking and organizing elements of the counter-hegemonic class and its allies. The intellectuals, discussed in the present paper, belong to traditional intellectuals, who act like a bridge connecting the dominant group with the masses. They help to propagate the ideology of the dominant group and get the masses mentally and spiritually ready to consent to that ideology.

When advocating English as the official language of the United States, such individuals as S.I. Hayakawa, John Tanton, Ron Unz, to name the most famous, fall into the category of traditional intellectuals.

As early as 1981, former U.S. Senator S.I. Hayakawa proposed an English Language Amendment to the Constitution. After his proposal got disapproved, Hayakawa teamed up with Dr John Tanton, a Michigan ophthalmologist, environmentalist, and population control activist, to found U.S. English, an organization which spearheaded the Official English Movement. They spared no efforts to advocate the importance of learning English and make English the official language. Hayakawa was never tired of quoting Theodore Roosevelt’s words: “We have room for but one language in this country, and that is the English language.” One figure, worth particular mention, is Ron Unz, a sponsor and advocator of the so-called English for the Children initiative, also known as Proposition 227. Unz approached a new strategy different from previous campaigns. Instead of attacking the immigrants for speaking other languages, Unz emphasized the importance of children’s “right” to learn English and their assimilation into the mainstream society. Unz’s strategy proved appealing to the public. Proposition 227 passed overwhelmingly on June 2, 1998, by a margin of 61 to 39 percent. These individuals acted as a bridge connecting the dominant group with the masses. On the one hand, they helped the dominant group spread the dominant culture; on the other hand, they could greatly influence the ideology of the masses, leading them to accept that of the dominant group.

4. Winning the Dominated Groups’ “Consent”

To put it simply, consent means that the norms and values of the dominant group have been widely accepted by the subordinated groups. Through persuading and educating the masses, the dominant group, with the help of intellectuals, leads the masses to agree to and support their ideology. The dominant group, Gramsci pointed out, maintained control not just through violence and political and economic coercion, but also through a hegemonic culture in which the values of the dominant group became the “common sense” values of all.

The “normal” exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent. Indeed, the attempt is always made to ensure that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion (Gramsci, 1971).

Hegemony entails the persuasion and education of individuals and groups in order to secure consent to the dominant group’s agenda. Through moral and intellectual persuasion, the dominant group develops a shared culture, in which people of the dominated group identify their own good with the good of the dominant group. This helps to maintain the status quo and avoid revolt against the dominant group.

Again, take Proposition 227 for instance. Unz took a different approach and avoided racist stain. He appeared to be an intimate friend of the minority groups, fighting for their “right.” Citing the persistence of high failure and dropout rates among Latino students, Unz blamed this phenomenon for the ineffectiveness of bilingual education. He argued that enormous numbers of California schoolchildren left years of schooling with limited spoken English and almost no ability to read or write English. It was bilingual education that prevented young immigrant children from learning English. Meanwhile, he highlighted the importance of learning English, articulating that English proficiency was crucial both to their academic success and to their economic and social advancement.

Besides, Unz made full use of media coverage to help achieve his purpose. In 1996, there occurred a protest against bilingual education at the Ninth Street Elementary School in Los Angeles. A group of immigrant parents pulled their children out of the school to protest its alleged failure to teach English. Consequently, massive coverage of this protest flooded the news media. Then, it was likely that many Californians with no direct knowledge of bilingual education questioned, "If the parents of children in these programs do not support them, why should I?" By contrast, the importance of English was highlighted. Advertisements, stressing that the key to advancement in the United States is a command of the nation's dominant language, can be instructive in this regard. In one typical ad, a husband sorrowfully informs his wife he has been passed over for a better job because his English just isn't good enough. About six months later, after taking an English course, he is able to tell his family over dinner that he has obtained a promotion to manager because he is now fully bilingual (Schmid, 2001). The public, which has never been clear about the rationale for native-language instruction, is increasingly skeptical of its results. With the advancement of English as the official language, assimilationist rhetoric had won a growing acceptance. Now it was making inroads into language-minority communities. Surveyed on whether they would favor an initiative to "require all public school instruction to be conducted in English and for students not fluent in English to be placed in a short-term English immersion program, 84 percent of Hispanic Californians answered in the affirmative" (Crawford, 2000, p. 96). Owing to his effective campaign strategies, Unz was able to influence the ideology of the public and finally win their consent and support, which led to the overwhelming passage of Proposition 227.

Based on Gramsci's cultural hegemony theory, especially the concepts of Civil Society, Intellectuals and Consent, this paper arrives at the conclusion that American language policy towards Asian and Latin immigrants is far from an issue merely concerning language and education; instead, it is actually a manipulative tool employed by the dominant group to achieve hegemonic control and to maintain their dominant power. From what has been analyzed above, the dominant group, with the help of intellectuals—English-advocating individuals, persuaded and educated the masses, and finally made the masses consent to the values and ideology of the dominant group and accept them willingly as "common sense" and "natural." In this process, cultural hegemony takes place. Admittedly, the language policy in the late twentieth century did play a positive role, to some extent, in upholding the unity and stability of American society. However, a probe into the domestic and international situation, upon which the language policy is made, can help us uncover the essence of such a change of policy. Exploring the language policy towards immigrants is significant in that it might arouse people's consciousness to preserve the language and culture of the minorities. The restriction of languages other than English will result in the loss of languages, and in turn, the cultures of the minorities. Linguistic and cultural diversity should be considered assets, instead of threats in multicultural America. Thus, the dominant group should hold a more tolerant attitude towards the languages and cultures of the language minorities.

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