

## Language Rights

The Linguistic Society of America was founded in 1924 to advance the scientific study of language. The Society's present membership of approximately 7000 persons and institutions includes a great proportion of the leading experts on language in the United States, as well as many from abroad. Many of the Society's members have experience with, or expertise in, bilingualism and multilingualism. Despite increasing interest in these topics, public debate is all too often based on misconceptions about language. In this Statement, the Society addresses some of these misconceptions and urges the protection of basic linguistic rights.

1. The vast majority of the world's nations are at least bilingual, and most are multilingual, even if one ignores the impact of modern migrations. Countries in which all residents natively speak the same language are a small exception, certainly not the rule. Even nations like France, Germany and the United Kingdom have important linguistic minorities within their borders. Furthermore, where diverse linguistic communities exist in one country, they have generally managed to coexist peacefully. Finland, Singapore, and Switzerland are only three examples. Where linguistic discord does arise, as it has with various degrees of intensity in Belgium, Canada, and Sri Lanka, it is generally the result of majority attempts to disadvantage or suppress a minority linguistic community, or it reflects underlying racial or religious conflicts. Multilingualism by itself is rarely an important cause of civil discord.

2. The territory that now constitutes the United States was home to hundreds of languages before the advent of European settlers. These indigenous languages belonged to several language families. Each native language is or was a fully developed system of communication with rich structures and expressive power. Many past and present members of the Society have devoted their professional lives to documenting and analyzing the native languages of the United States.

3. Unfortunately, most of the indigenous languages of the United States are severely threatened. All too often their eradication was deliberate government policy. In other cases, these languages have suffered from biased or uninformed views that they are mere "dialects" with simple grammatical structures and limited vocabularies. The decline of America's indigenous languages has been closely linked to the loss of much of the culture of their speakers.

4. Because of this history, the Society believes that the government and people of the United States have a special obligation to enable indigenous peoples to retain their languages and cultures. The Society strongly supports the federal recognition of this obligation, as expressed in the Native American Languages Act. The Society urges federal, state and local governments to continue to affirmatively implement the policies of the Act by enacting legislation, appropriating more adequate funding, and monitoring the progress made under the Act.

5. The United States is also home to numerous immigrant languages other than English. The arrival of some of these languages, such as Dutch, French, German, and Spanish, predates the founding of our nation. Many others have arrived more recently. The substantial number of residents of the United States who speak languages other than English presents us with both challenges and opportunities.

6. The challenges of multilingualism are well known: incorporating linguistic minorities into our economic life, teaching them English so they can participate more fully in our society, and properly educating their children. Unfortunately, in the process of incorporating immigrants and their offspring into American life, bilingualism is often wrongly regarded as a "handicap" or "language barrier." Of course, inability to speak English often functions as a barrier to economic advancement in the United States. But to be bilingual--to speak both English and another language--should be encouraged, not stigmatized. There is no convincing evidence that bilingualism by itself impedes cognitive or educational development. On the contrary, there is evidence that it may actually enhance certain types of intelligence.

7. Multilingualism also presents our nation with many benefits and opportunities. For example, bilingual individuals can use their language skills to promote our business interests abroad. Their linguistic competence strengthens our foreign diplomatic missions and national defense. And they can better teach the rest of us to speak other languages.

8. Moreover, people who speak a language in addition to English provide a role model for other Americans. Our national record on learning other languages is notoriously poor. A knowledge of foreign languages is necessary not just for immediate practical purposes, but also because it gives people the sense of international community that America requires if it is to compete successfully in a global economy.

9. Furthermore, different languages allow different ways of expressing experiences, thoughts, and aesthetics. America's art and culture are greatly enriched by the presence of diverse languages among its citizens.

10. To remedy our policies towards the languages of Native Americans and to encourage acquisition or retention of languages other than English by all Americans, the Linguistic Society of America urges our nation to protect and promote the linguistic rights of its people. At a minimum, all residents of the United States should be guaranteed the following linguistic rights:

A. To be allowed to express themselves, publicly or privately, in the language of their choice.

B. To maintain their native language and, should they so desire, to pass it on to their children.

C. When their facility in English is inadequate, to be provided a qualified interpreter in any proceeding in which the government endeavors to deprive them of life, liberty or property. Moreover, where there is a substantial linguistic minority in a community, interpretation ought to be provided by courts and other state agencies in any matter that significantly affects the public.

D. To have their children educated in a manner that affirmatively acknowledges their native language abilities as well as ensures their acquisition of English. Children can learn only when they understand their teachers. As a consequence, some use of children's native language in the classroom is often desirable if they are to be educated successfully.

E. To conduct business in the language of their choice.

F. To use their preferred language for private conversations in the workplace.

G. To have the opportunity to learn to speak, read and write English.

Notwithstanding the multilingual history of the United States, the role of English as our common language has never seriously been questioned. Research has shown that newcomers to America continue to learn English at rates comparable to previous generations of immigrants. All levels of government should adequately fund programs to teach English to any resident who desires to learn it. Nonetheless, promoting our common language need not, and should not, come at the cost of violating the rights of linguistic minorities.

Prepared by the Committee on Social and Political Concerns

Approved by the Executive Committee of the LSA

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