

Chapter 3

Language Policy

Argumentation and Rhetoric, Pre– and Post–9/11

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ABSTRACT

In the post-9/11 era, the debate on the necessity of an official language has resurfaced. While the historical context for the policy push has changed, have the underlying arguments for official English? To consider this question, the content of legislation, discourse, and media coverage of state-level English language policy debates before and after September 11, 2001 was analyzed. Nearly 2000 texts spanning 1994 through 2008 were examined to return composite scores for 5 overarching semantic features and 35 sub-features. Statistical analyses indicate significant differences between the pre- and post-9/11 legislation in the variable commonality. In the post-9/11 groupings of news stories and opinion pieces, the variable certainty decreased significantly, while realism and the sub-variables denial and blame increased significantly. This study provides an additional perspective on the events of 9/11, examines the role of persuasive argumentation in the policy process, and expands the tools available to the policy analyst.

INTRODUCTION

The events of September 11, 2001 have made an indelible mark on the culture and even the psyche of the United States of America.

Among the sea of American flags, among the memorial displays around the world, amid the developing international crisis, many felt that the United States, and perhaps the world, had entered a new age of terror. “Nothing Will Ever Be the Same” read a full-page headline in a September 11 special edition of the Philadelphia City Paper. The idea that September 11 had “changed everything”

was ubiquitous, the date a dividing line between a “before” and an “after.” (Dudziak, 2003, p. 2)

In reaction, the nation has desired to feel safe: we have created a Department of Homeland Security, and we have also enacted the Patriot Act, which has many questioning what liberties we may be trading for the additional security (Groenewold, 2006, p. 62). Along with these measures came the recognition that within our intelligence communities we have fallen behind in foreign language acquisition. To address the dearth of linguistic expertise in languages of importance to national security, President George W. Bush launched

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the National Security Language Initiative (U.S. Department of State, 2006), which acknowledges:

An essential component of the U.S. national security in the post-9/11 world is the ability to engage foreign governments and peoples, especially in critical regions, to encourage reform, promote understanding, convey respect for other cultures and provide an opportunity to learn more about our country and its citizens. To do this, we must be able to communicate in other languages, a challenge for which we are unprepared. (U.S. Department of State, 2006, para. 2)

In contrast, during this period, we have also witnessed resurgence in efforts to make English the official language of the U.S in a number of government jurisdictions, from the local to the state-level. Why does this issue appear to be rising on the agenda again? On the national level, language policy in the past 200 years has oscillated between “two opposing extremes...legislative extensions of civil rights principles to language minority groups [and] attempts to restrict such an extension of rights” (Lo Bianco, 1999, p. 54).

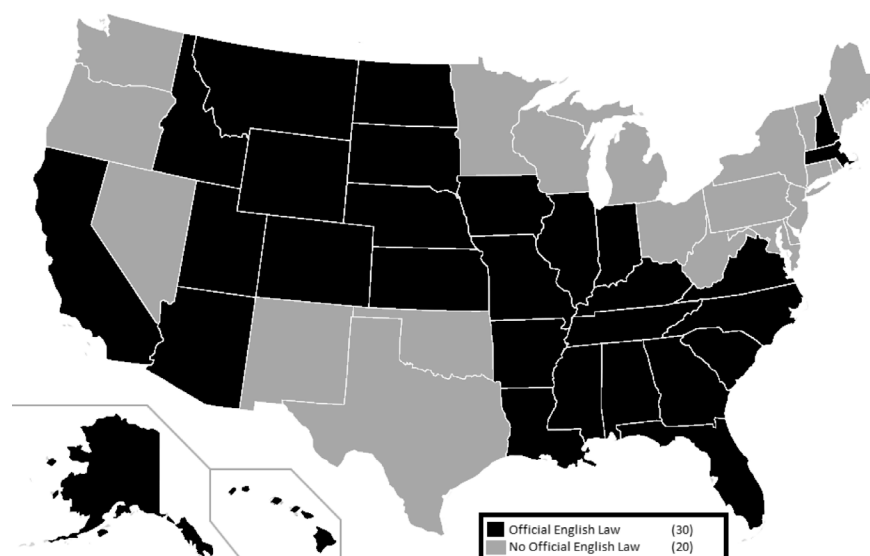
Prior to 2001, 26 states had declared English their official language, while at least 12 others had

debated or proposed legislation unsuccessfully (Schildkraut, 2001, p. 445). Post 9/11 and through 2008, in the remaining 12 states, legislation has passed in four additional states and was being considered in others.

While there is a stated need to increase our knowledge base of languages and cultures, there is recurrent opposition toward accepting languages other than English in the public sphere. As the documents – news stories, editorials, and letters to the editor -- collected for this study bear witness, this incongruity is apparent and appalling to some, and to others, rational and practical. Regardless of the policy orientation, it is the objective of this study to determine, based on the semantic features within our messages, if and how the national message has changed since the events of September 11, 2001.

One way to explore these questions is through content analysis, focusing on the rhetoric used in the bills, legislation, documented discourse and media coverage of the policy debate of those states with legislative proposals prior to September 11, 2001, and on the legislative proposals and argumentation post-9/11. One may postulate that the

Figure 1. States with official english laws



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