



Rebranding bilingualism: The shifting discourses of language education policy in California's 2016 election



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ABSTRACT

Using the methods of critical discourse analysis, we examine California Proposition 227, *English Language in Public Schools* (1998), and its repeal measure, Proposition 58, the *California Education for a Global Economy Initiative* (2016). Through comparative analyses of framing, keywords, spatial and temporal markers, actors, and legislative titles, we illustrate a discursive shift. While Proposition 227 presented bilingual education as a threat to children's—and, by proxy, the nation's—well-being (a *language as problem* orientation), Proposition 58 represents multilingual education as key to students' future economic success and to the state and nation's continued global economic advantage (a *language as resource* orientation). We argue that Proposition 58's approach to "marketing" multilingual education may have contributed to its passing in November 2016, a result that we celebrate. At the same time, we raise questions about whether policies framed within one discursive regime (e.g., neoliberalism and global human capital) can eventually serve the aims of another (e.g., equity, plurality, and social justice), or whether discourse is destiny in policy making.

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1. Introduction

In 1998, voters in the state of California passed a ballot measure placing severe restrictions on the way English Language Learners (ELLs) could be taught in public schools. Targeted specifically at the elimination of bilingual education programs, Proposition 227 proposed legislation that would mandate that children who were learning English must, with few exceptions, only be taught in English. Proposition 227 emerged in a period of heightened nationalistic and anti-immigrant sentiment (Ovando, 2003), and it capitalized on the association of bilingual education with Spanish, and of Spanish with unchecked immigration, to convince voters that teaching in English was best for children, families, and the nation (Johnson & Martinez, 1999; Wiley, 2004). When Proposition 227 passed in 1998, it had the effect of strangling many bilingual programs, and it earned California the reputation of being an "English-only state."

In 2016, however, California voters were given the chance to re-evaluate this restrictive language education policy. On November

8, 2016, Californians voted 73.52% to 26.48% to pass Proposition 58, the *California Education for a Global Economy (EdGE) Initiative*, which lifted the limits on language of instruction in California's public schools. Were one to ignore the rest of the 2016 US election, Proposition 58's passing might be explained by the idea that Americans in general and Californians in particular had simply become less anti-immigrant and less nationalistic. Yet, anyone who witnessed the 2016 presidential campaign cycle saw that the day was won by now President Trump's rhetoric about mass deportations, building "the wall," and bans on whole groups of immigrants and refugees. And while California's voters have leaned increasingly democratic since Reagan's election in 1967, in the 2016 election, 1,000,000 voters who cast a ballot for Trump also voted to pass Proposition 58 (California Secretary of State, 2016a, 2016b). What would make a voter who was otherwise persuaded to "make America great again" vote on the very same ballot for a bill that could mean the rebirth of bilingual education, which is historically linked to the fight for social justice and linguistic minority rights?

We argue that the answer to this question lies in the texts of the two propositions themselves. As we will show below, Proposition 58 did not simply argue for the removal of the restrictions placed on schools by Proposition 227. Rather, it constructed a sophisticated argument, built on economic grounds, for the active promotion of

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multilingualism and multilingual education¹ in the state. It is the construction of this argument—and the contrasts to the argument constructed in Proposition 227—that is the focus of this paper.

Our analysis is predicated on the notion that, within each of the legislative texts mentioned above, language is both the topic at hand and the tool by which various and competing realities are constructed. Using the methods of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001, 2003), we examine the construction of these realities. More specifically, we look at the competing visions of language and language education presented within *California Proposition 227, English Language in Public Schools* (1998), and the statute that repealed it, *California Proposition 58, the California Education for a Global Economy Initiative* (2016). Through a variety of lexico-grammatical analyses, we contrast these two texts and the ideological spaces they construct.

Linking the two policy texts with the socio-political contexts from which they emerge, we illustrate how the language used within each of these documents draws on and perpetuates discourses serving different language orientations (Ruiz, 1984)—*bilingualism as problem* (and English as solution) in Proposition 227 (1998) and *multilingualism as resource* for human capital development in Proposition 58 (2016). We argue that, in the time between the writing of the two texts, discourses of globalization and neoliberalism (Fairclough, 2006; Holborow, 2015) have infiltrated, or perhaps further infiltrated, the educational arena and have served to reframe debates around language education. We show how Proposition 58, the *California Education for a Global Economy Initiative*, appropriates current neoliberal discourses to justify a revitalization of bilingual (now “multilingual”) education in California. At the same time, these subtle linguistic shifts mark changes in the goals of multilingual education itself—from equal educational opportunity to competition in the global marketplace. We use the case of California to raise questions about whether policies framed within one discursive regime (e.g., neoliberalism and global human capital) can eventually serve the aims of another (e.g., equity, plurality, social justice), or whether discourse is destiny in policy making.

2. Background

2.1. Language education policy: a retrospective

In this section, we provide a brief history of language education policy in the U.S. to highlight the ways in which attitudes toward non-dominant languages and their role in education have shifted in conjunction with various social and political developments. This provides the historical, social, and political context within which our present work is situated.

During the first century after the founding of the U.S., attitudes of tolerance abounded and bilingual education, as well as instruction in languages other than English, was quite common in a number of states including Pennsylvania (German), Minnesota (Swedish), Michigan (Dutch), Wisconsin (Polish), and Louisiana (French) (Kloss, 1977). Toward the end of the 19th century, an influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe—seen as racially inferior by the northern Europeans already present in the

US—prompted negative attitudes toward the languages these new immigrants spoke. Concerns about assimilation and fears about the loss of Anglo dominance led to the Americanization movement and the first wave of English-only laws. Between 1872 and 1923, thirty-four states made English the language of instruction in schools (Lleras-Muney & Shertzer, 2015). World War I only strengthened the nationalist sentiment and further engendered hostile feelings toward languages other than English (Ovando, 2003).

In 1957, the launch of Sputnik by the former Soviet Union shifted the tides once more, leading the U.S. government to channel massive federal funds not only into math and science education but also into foreign language and heritage language programs (Alderson & Beretta, 1992; Fishman, 2001). Knowledge of languages other than English was seen, for the first time, as a resource for national security. Language policy during this period was also influenced by the Civil Rights movement. In 1968, Title VII, the *Bilingual Education Act* (BEA), was added to the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) to meet the educational needs of limited English proficient (LEP) students. In 1974, the Supreme Court ruled in *Lau v. Nichols* that students with limited English proficiency who were taught in English-only classrooms were being denied equal access to course content. Over the next few years, hundreds of school districts adopted bilingual education programs (Crawford, 1996).

As the 1970s drew to a close, the pendulum once again began to swing in the other direction. Many federally funded programs came under attack by the (re)emerging English-only movement (Wiley, 2001). Over the next two decades, this movement spawned a number of organizations such as *U.S. English* (1983) and *ProEnglish* (1994), whose mission was to fight for official English policies at all levels of government. Opponents of the English-only movement, concerned about the nativist ideologies it promotes, have argued that the debate over language is largely symbolic, masking a deeper “conflict over the impact of immigration and demographic diversity” (Crawford, 2000, p. 40). Indeed, John Tanton, who served on the board of *U.S. English* and went on to found *ProEnglish*, also helped start three national immigration restriction organizations and has been called an “anti-immigration crusader” (DeParle, 2011). These connections highlight the way that language frequently serves as a proxy for race, class, and religion (May, 2012; Ovando, 2003), as well as national identity (Schmidt, 2000), and how it has been used as a more covert method of discrimination (Johnson & Martinez, 1999). Thus, rather than framing Mexican immigrants as the problem, proponents of the English-only movement frame Spanish as the problem, as a threat to national unity whose maintenance leads to the “ghettoization” of its speakers (Wiley, 2004). Under that logic, in 1998, Proposition 227 passed in California, effectively eliminating bilingual education in the state. Similar laws were then passed in Arizona in 2000 and Massachusetts in 2002. These initiatives mandated the implementation of a Structured English Immersion (SEI) approach to language education, in which children were “taught English by being taught in English” (Proposition 227, Article 2 §305).

This historical review of language education policy in the U.S. demonstrates the shifting tides of public opinion with regard to bilingual education as well as the way that policy making at the state and national level reflects larger social and political processes. These processes, in turn, shape/are shaped by the discourses used to talk about them (Chouliarakis & Fairclough, 1999). In the following section, we review some of the discourses brought to bear within our two focal policies.

2.2. Discourses of language, discourses of education

2.2.1. Threat and reform

Since its re-emergence in the early 1980s, the English-only movement has promulgated its cause primarily through the discourse of threat, and the other side of the same discursive coin, the

¹ All references to education in more than one language in Proposition 58 use the word “multilingual” rather than “bilingual.” It is important to note that the programs to which these labels refer are likely to all be two-language approaches, educating children in English and another language. There are unlikely to be trilingual programs, or full monolingual immersion in languages other than English (except maybe in the early grades in developmental bilingual programs, which will taper off to 50–50 in later grades). Thus, what’s interesting about the shift from “bilingual” to “multilingual” is not a change in the programs that these words refer to in the real world, but, as we will show, the associations of each word with different discourses.

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