

# The Linguistic Consequences of “English-Only” in the United States

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## Objectives

This project examines how official “English-Only” language policies and the socio-cultural attitudes behind such policies directly and negatively impact language acquisition and maintenance for bilingual Americans, focusing on three specific categories of bilingual individuals:

- Adults learning English as a second language.
- Children growing up bilingual.
- American students learning foreign languages.

## Introduction

On his campaign trail for the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump stated “This is a country where we speak English, not Spanish”. Trump is not alone in his opinion that English should be the exclusive language used by U.S. citizens. This “English-Only” ideology argues for the universal use of English in the U.S., claiming that this would aid in uniting the American people, potentially strengthening democratic participation and economic progression.

However, those opposed to such policies outline a variety of legal, educational, and socio-cultural reasons why “English-Only” does no such thing, and instead promotes discrimination against non-English speakers in the country. The project outlines the **negative linguistic implications** of “English-Only” policies and attitudes, examining how they directly **inhibit language acquisition and maintenance** for bilinguals from a variety of language backgrounds.

## History of “English-Only”

The U.S. has an incredibly diverse linguistic history, and language diversity was a cornerstone of American life through the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Language attitudes began to shift at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of **immigration** and **nationalization**. The stigma associated with “new” immigrants from comparatively poorer and less democratic parts of Europe, coupled with World War I and increasing pressure to promote a unified American culture, led some to propose that English should be the official language of the American government and people (Schmidt, 2000). Since that time, 36 U.S. states and territories have declared English as the official language (Crawford, 2008). However, despite repeated efforts by English-Only supporters, **the federal government has no official language**.

## Adult ESL Learners

The **English Unity Act**, the most recent bill to propose English as the official language of the U.S., would require all citizenship applicants to be tested for English proficiency. Such a requirement does not account for the unique educational needs of adult language learners. While adults who decide to learn English as a second language have the advantage of full immersion in the English language, their native language can also serve as a key tool in second language learning (Abid, 2020). However, this native language resource is at risk of loss or attrition. **Attrition** can happen as soon as a few months after moving to a new linguistic environment (Chang 2010), and the loss of one’s native language is not only a loss of cultural heritage, but also the loss of a critical tool which can benefit the English learning process.

## Conclusion

The need for multilingual communication across the globe is expected to continue to rise in the coming decades, and in the meantime, the U.S is falling behind in their ability to meet this challenge. The dismissal and/or abolition of official English policies at the national, state, and local levels would be a fundamental step in acknowledging the United States’ diverse cultural and linguistic heritage and promoting balanced and proficient bilingualism for all U.S. citizens.

## Additional Information

The **English Unity Act** is a bill that would make English the official language of the U. S. This bill was presented to House of Representatives in February, 2021. It is currently pending review from the Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship.

If passed, the bill would require that all official government business be conducted in English. It includes a framework for implementation and enforcement of the law, including the implementation English testing as part of the application process for U.S. citizenship.

## Key Takeaway

English-Only policies and their underlying language attitudes create **unique linguistic challenges** for bilingual Americans who wish to develop and maintain a strong, balanced bilingualism.

## Bilingual Children

For children growing up in bilingual households, proficiency in both the community language and their heritage language has been shown to have distinct benefits for social (Kádár-Fulop, 1988) and cognitive development (Padilla et al., 1991).

The successful development and maintenance of both languages, however, requires **sufficient exposure** to both languages not only in infancy, but throughout their youth. If this is not the case, the heritage language is unlikely to fully develop, and is more likely to attrit later in life. A key goal of English-Only advocates is the implication of English-Only policies in the American public school system. Such policies deprive bilingual children of key opportunities to gain experience in their non-English language and **inhibit the development of functional and proficient bilingual adults**.

## Foreign Language Learners

The U.S. is falling alarmingly behind other nations in foreign language education (A.C.I. E., 2017). This trend can be attributed in part to a lack of external motivation on the part of the community and educational system as well as a lack personal motivation on the part of students. Students who grow up in an English-Only environment are less likely to be motivated to learn foreign languages.

For students who are motivated to learn a foreign language, most U.S. educational programs begin foreign language instruction in high school, when students are 13-14 years old. Linguistic research suggests that there is a developmental **sensitive period** for language learning, and that language acquisition is generally more successful when started at a young age (Lenneberg, 1967). This sets up a less-than-ideal acquisition circumstances for U.S. students studying foreign languages.

## References

A full list of citations can be found at <https://www.meganmbrown.com/written-work>

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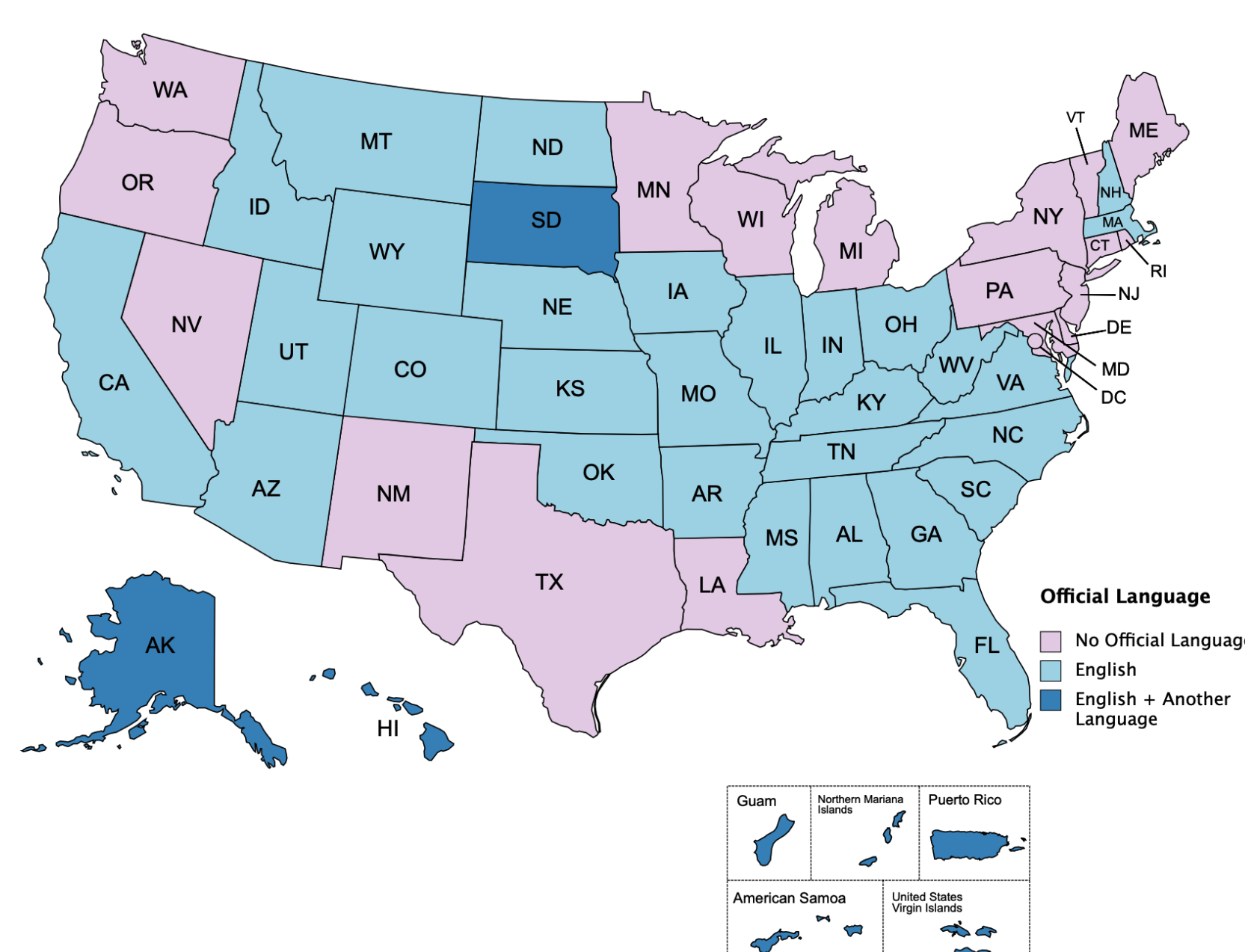


Figure 1: Official language policies of U.S. states and territories.

