On the Curious Question of Language in Miami

By Max J. Castro

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Although more stereotyped for other vices, Miami is the birthplace of the contemporary English Only movement in the United States. On November 4, 1980, more than 59 percent of the voters in Dade County, Florida, approved an “antilingual” ordinance.22 Its first clause said that “the expenditure of county funds for the purpose of utilizing any language other than English, or promoting any culture other than that of the United States, is prohibited.” The second clause established that “all county governmental meetings, hearings and publications shall be in the English language only” (emphasis added; see p. 131).

The Dade County vote was the first shot in the language wars of the 1980s, involving numerous campaigns to declare English the official language. It began, seemingly by spontaneous combustion, in the summer of 1980. A Miami Herald reporter, writing on the day after the vote, described the sequence of events:

Marion Plunske heard Emmy Shafer on a WNWS radio talk show on July 8. The two women started their campaign the next day and the Citizens of Dade United registered as a political action group on July 21. From the start the campaign seemed to run itself.

In just over four weeks the group gathered 44,166 signatures, nearly twice as many as they needed to put the ordinance on the ballot. Exulting in their strength, they brought another 25,767 signatures to the supervisor of elections on Sept. 16.

“It was like giving gold away,” Shafer said in late October. On one day alone she received over 300 phone calls from people who wanted to sign the anti-bilingualism petition.23

The antibilingual campaign was, first and foremost, an episode of collective behavior akin to a panic or craze. It did not emerge from any institution or pre-existing interest group, and it developed without benefit of much in the way of organization or resources. The phenomenon’s appeal, however, was highly selective. Despite its impressive success, the antibilingual movement, both in terms of leadership and electoral support, was almost exclusively a creature of one ethnic sector of a triethnic community: whites of other than Hispanic descent, who voted in favor of the proposal in massive numbers. In contrast, Hispanic opposition to the ordinance was overwhelming, while a solid majority of black voters also opposed the amendment, despite what the Herald described as “their history of cool relations with Latinos in Dade.” The ethnic breakdown of the vote was24

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For</th>
<th>Against</th>
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<tr>
<td>Whites (non-Hispanic)</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanics</td>
<td>15%</td>
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Established institutions like the Miami Herald, fearing a worsening of ethnic tensions, came out against the ordinance, to no avail. The Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, a key element of the white Anglo elite, spent $50,000 in opposition. In contrast, the antibilingual forces spent less than $10,000 in their successful campaign. Clearly, supporters of the ordinance were motivated by ethnic resentments and a feeling of alienation from the community in which they lived. In the exit poll cited above, more than half of the non-Hispanic whites who voted in favor said they would be pleased if the measure “would make Miami a less attractive place for Cubans and other Spanish-speaking people.” More than 75 percent said they would move away from Dade County “if it were practical.”25

The ethnic polarization seen in the antibilingual vote reflected widely diverging interpretations of the impact of Hispanics on the city. According to the exit poll, more than 85 percent of Hispanics agreed with the statement that “the Latin influence has helped this county’s economy and made it a more enjoyable place to live,” as com-

22. The vote was 251,259 in favor, 173,168 against; Fredric Tasker, “Latinas Fight New Language Law in Court,” Miami Herald, Nov. 6, 1980, p. 1-C.
24. Ibid.
pared with only 42 percent of blacks and 39 percent of non-Hispanic whites. Also, two out of three Hispanics agreed that the vote on the antibilingual ordinance was “an insult to the Spanish-speaking residents of Dade,” while only one in four non-Hispanic whites agreed.

The Dade County antibilingual campaign was a harbinger and model of future language struggles. It provided the method that would prove most effective for reversing bilingual gains and imposing official monolingualism: the citizen-initiated referendum. It provided the first test of the extent of voter sentiment against government recognition of language pluralism and thus of the potential for a national English Only movement. It showed that even in a community with a huge and empowered language minority and in the face of opposition from the local establishment, a group of political novices could push through an English Only proposition. Finally, it gave testimony to the divisive nature of the issue.

In Miami this movement can be understood as the spontaneous reaction of an alienated, white, non-Hispanic, nonelite population against the Cuban/Hispanic presence. Why did this presence arouse such a strong reaction? Why did Miami give birth to English Only? “This question of language was curious,” writes Joan Didion. “The sound of spoken Spanish was common in Miami, but it was also common in Los Angeles, and Houston, and even in the cities of the northeast.” The difference was that in the other cities Spanish was “the language spoken by the people who worked in the car wash and came to trim the trees and cleared the tables in restaurants. In Miami Spanish was spoken by the people who ate in the restaurants, the people who owned the cars and the trees, which made, on the socioauditory scale, a considerable difference . . . . What was so unusual about Spanish in Miami was not that it was so often spoken, but that it was so often heard.”

Immigrants are not supposed to be heard. Immigrants, particularly Spanish-speaking immigrants from a Caribbean island, are expected to be subordinate—numerically, economically, politically, culturally, linguistically, even psychologically. In terms of numbers, Americans expect immigrants to be a small fraction of the population. In class terms, immigrants are supposed to work for others, for established Americans, generally in low-paid and undesirable jobs. Politically, they are expected to have little or no power; immigrant status is virtually synonymous with powerlessness. Immigrant culture and language—assumed to have little prestige or usefulness in comparison with the dominant American culture and the English language—are supposed to fade away quickly as assimilation runs its course. Psychologically, the uprooted immigrant is subject to the stigma placed by the dominant society on foreigners. By 1980 the norm of immigrant subordination was being massively violated in Miami. The English Only movement arose as one reaction of a sector of the population to that transgression.

It premiered in a city that by 1980 had the largest proportion of immigrants of any U.S. metropolitan area. Even before the middle of that year, when the Mariel Cuban boatlift and the Haitian influx would swell the numbers, Miami was far more popular than Los Angeles or New York City as a destination for newcomers. Consider the following ranking of cities in terms of population born outside the United States:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miami</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total U.S.</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
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Miami’s lead was no doubt increased when, shortly after the census was taken, tens of thousands of Cuban and Haitian boat people poured into South Florida in one of the most dramatic and traumatic episodes of U.S. immigration history.

Immigrants had transformed Miami in the 1960s and 1970s, and the nature of the demographic and cultural changes were quite specific. As a result of the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Cubans fleeing the 1959 revolution, and of smaller but still significant numbers of other Latin American immigrants, Miami underwent a lightning Latinization, an enormous cultural change in scarcely two decades. In 1960 about 5 percent of the metropolitan population was Hispanic. Just twenty years later, shortly before the Mariel boatlift, this figure had risen to 36 percent and, by the time of the November 1980 referendum, to 41 percent.

Latinization, accelerated by the sheer number of new immigrants, inevitably changed the cultural and social climate of the city from one monopolized by dominant North American norms and styles to one in which other traditions and forms competed powerfully for cultural and linguistic space. While English remained overwhelmingly the

dominant language of the area, and mainstream American culture the dominant culture, another linguistic and cultural tradition had managed to establish—in an astoundingly short time in historical scale—a significant presence. The Latin influence affected the way houses looked in Miami, how people dressed on the street, the language spoken on the bus, at the bank, and on the airwaves, and most other aspects of community life. Many people were uncomfortable with the changes, which they said made them feel like foreigners in their own country.

The English supremacy movement arose out of this alienation and the resentment it created. The language of the campaign signaled the level of fear and anger among the backers of the proposal. At the outset, a spokesman for the antibilingual forces called bilingualism “a cancer in the community.” As the Herald observed:

If the people who voted for the new ordinance had one thing in common it was their unhappiness, a peevish sort of impatience with their neighbors. Sizable numbers of them made it clear they are fed up with co-existing. Now they want to leave, no matter which language wins out. 28

Indeed, the fact that three out of every four white voters who supported the antibilingual ordinance told the Herald that they would move out of Dade County if they could bespeak an estrangement from the community among a huge sector of non-Hispanic Miami, and especially among the measure’s core constituency, the white population. That these sentiments went beyond mere discontent with life in the city is suggested by the fact that more than half the measure’s supporters hoped it would make the city less attractive to Hispanics. The essential anti-immigrant, anti-Hispanic character of the English Only movement—the full extent of which would emerge later in confidential documents by its founder, Dr. John Tanton (see pp. 171-77)—was already implicit in its Miami genesis.

Numbers matter, but what was unique about Miami’s Spanish-speaking newcomers in 1980 was not that they were numerous, but that so many had become economically successful. The middle-class background of many of the Cuban exiles was undoubtedly the key factor in the speed of their economic success. Far from occupying the lowest rungs in the economy, Cubans were competing—often successfully—with natives in the labor market, in business, and in the professions. As one example, between 1969 and 1982 the number of Hispanic-owned businesses in Miami increased by 622 percent, from 3,447 to 24,898. The rise of Cuban enterprises in Miami provided fertile ground for language maintenance and produced real and perceived interethnic economic competition, which fueled fears and resentments among Anglos that translated into support for English Only politics. Cuban and other Latin immigration had not only changed the demographic and cultural makeup of Miami but had also upset expectations about class relations between immigrant and established American. It violated the expected sequence of assimilation, then economic success.

Dade County was the site of the first bilingual education program in a modern U.S. public school, established in 1963 at the Coral Way elementary school. In 1973 the board of commissioners for Metropolitan Dade County passed a resolution that “declares Dade County a bilingual and bicultural county, where Spanish language is considered the second official language.” And so, Miami—which had led the country in bilingual education and bilingual government services—in 1980 led the backlash against bilingualism. While the English Only movement aimed specifically to abolish the official recognition of other languages and cultures, many of its adherents had a broader program: undoing institutional mechanisms like bilingual education, through which those languages and cultures could be maintained and transmitted.

Probably the single most resented consequence of the ethnic transformation was the increasing number of jobs in Miami that required bilingual skills. In this arena bilingualism had real, not just symbolic, consequences for non-Hispanic Miamians. But for many it also symbolized a reversal of the expectation that the newcomers must adjust to the dominant language and culture. Even worse, it conferred upon immigrants a labor market advantage based on a need that had been created by their own presence. The issue of bilingualism in employment crystallized the symbolic and socioeconomic grievances that infuriated backers of the antibilingual movement. The fact that Miami’s bilingual job market had resulted from decisions by thousands of private employers made it an impossible target for an ordinance aimed at county services. Nevertheless, resentment over the issue undoubtedly increased support for the antibilingual campaign.

Miami’s antibilingual campaign arose in one sector of the formerly dominant culture as a collective reaction to immigration, Latinization, and Cuban economic empowerment, and seized upon the trend toward bilingualism in government, education, and the labor market. By directly curtailing the use of Spanish and other minority languages in a wide range of county programs, it succeeded in sending a message about power and ethnicity in Miami. Yet judged by the wider aspirations expressed by its supporters on the day of the vote, the

antilingual effort must be judged a failure. Far from making the city an uncomfortable place for Spanish-speaking people to live, the movement made no dent in the pace of Cuban/Latin growth or cultural, socioeconomic, and political empowerment, all of which accelerated in the 1980s.

Ten years after its electoral success, the futility of the English Only movement can be seen in the evolving practices of the Miami Herald, a leading corporation as well as civic presence in Dade County. In the late 1970s the newspaper created a Spanish-language edition, El Herald. A modest daily supplement, it had limited staff and editorial independence, but was nevertheless the first Spanish-language daily produced by a major American newspaper. In the 1980s, after passage of the antibilingual ordinance, the Herald responded to its miserable penetration of the Hispanic market by upgrading and expanding its Spanish-language edition, now known as El Nuevo Herald. The corporation also promoted training in the Spanish language and Latin American culture among its employees. Finally, in 1990, Roberto Suárez, a Cuban-American, was named president of the Miami Herald Publishing Company. The message is not lost on those who resent the ascendancy of Miami’s newcomers. As one reader wrote in a letter to the editor:

Well, it is finally over! Roberto Suárez’s becoming president of the Miami Herald Publishing Co. kills—once and for all—any chance of Miami’s ever returning to its former status as an English-speaking city located in the United States! Shortly it will be time to begin a death watch over the Herald’s English editions. . . . To get a letter printed, you’ll have to say nice things, such as how very enjoyable it is to listen to the 120-decibel level of casual Cuban conversation. . . . Well, I don’t need a big pile of El Nuevo Herlds to fall on me—it’s time to move on. Maybe I’ll go back to the United States. I still remember some English. I’ll get by.29

And yet, what is happening in Miami is quite different from the xenophobe’s nightmare of a Cuban takeover. It is much more interesting and complex. Geography has made southern Florida a kind of border area, and the Cuban presence dates from the late nineteenth century, when thousands of Cubans resided in Key West and Tampa, before Miami was founded in 1896. In the late twentieth century Miami has become, among other things, the border between Latin America and the United States. Middle-class Latin Americans come to Miami to shop, invest, get medical treatment, and transact busi-

ness. When they are dispossessed by revolution or threatened by instability, Miami is where they usually flee. Such groups have resources—not always material—that enable them to interact with Miami residents in ways that differ significantly from the norm of immigrant-native relations.

The same changes that created among Anglos a sense of disempowerment and loss of community had, for Cubans and other Latinos, a diametrically opposite effect. Enrique Fernández, a Cuban-American journalist who lives in New York, overstates the facts of the case, but captures the essence of the Cuban/Latino attachment to Miami:

I keep going back to Miami, the only American city where I feel on top. I don’t mean just Cuban. Miami is a Latino city, where English is virtually a second language and, most importantly, where our speech patterns, our gestures, our posture, our dress, our subdued Latino selves are all part of the dominant culture. . . . Miami is the one place in America where Latinos are spared the full weight of the arrogance of the empire.30

Cubans in Miami have been joining the mainstream and thereby transforming it, not by making Miami a Spanish-speaking, Latin American city, but rather by making it a much more multicultural, even transcultural, city. Cubans and other Hispanics have not created a Latin Miami, but a New Miami where the Latin sensibility and presence is increasingly integral—somewhat in the way that Cajun culture is a constituent part of what defines Louisiana. Spanish has hardly replaced English as the dominant language in Miami, but it has become a significant second language. Rather than existing in an isolated cultural ghetto, Cubans are becoming involved in the city’s traditional institutions, from chambers of commerce and labor unions to the United Way and political parties. These institutions have not been Cubanized but have been affected in complicated and often fascinating ways. For several years the ascendant Republican Party of Dade County, which owes its success mostly to Cuban Americans, was presided over by Jeb Bush, the very Anglo son of the President of the United States. Yet the younger Bush, who is married to a Mexican immigrant, speaks nearly flawless Spanish.

Cubans have also played key roles in creating new institutions that are not Cuban as such, but reflect a process of cultural combination. The Miami Sound Machine, with its mix of Latin rhythms and American pop styles, and the Calle Ocho festival, which began under the

The name of “Open House Eight,” the brainchild of Cuban yuppies (a.k.a. “yucas”31) in the Kiwanis Club of Little Havana, are good examples.

The Dade County antibilingual movement, which ignored these distinctions, was an attempt to legislate away the new demographic and cultural realities of Miami, which it could neither reverse nor destroy. The current crisis of the national Official English movement suggests that in this regard, too, the experience of Miami might point the way to the future.

Language Struggles in a Changing California Community

By John Horton and José Calderón

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The rise of the Official English movement in the United States could well signal a growing nativism and anti-immigrant backlash. Like the nativist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the campaign for Official English coincides historically with a period of massive immigration. During the 1980s about 1 million immigrants and refugees, overwhelmingly from Asia and Latin America, entered the country legally and an undetermined number came without documents. California has been a primary destination. By 1983 its foreign-born population was already estimated to be about 20 percent.32 In this state dramatically transformed by newcomers, voters have approved Official English measures by wide margins.

Will the broad consensus behind Official English translate automatically into strong support for the restrictive legislation being proposed by the movement’s leaders? Recent electoral studies show significant pockets of opposition behind the dominant consensus: mainstream media and public officials, liberals, the highly educated, Latinos, and (to a lesser extent) Asian Americans. Can the rest of the population—the apparent supporters—be dismissed as xenophobic, racist, or right-wing? Electoral statistics cannot provide all the answers because they touch only the surface of complex and unexamined social processes. In order to assess the significance of the Official English movement, and to locate its roots of support and opposition, we need to tap the lived experience of established residents and immigrants in their communities. We need detailed ethnographic case studies of how the forces for and against language restrictions are played out—how they are formed, reinforced, or transformed in the course of actual political struggle.

What follows is a report on one such study of politics and language in Monterey Park, California, the city widely proclaimed, and frequently denounced, as the first suburban Chinatown in the United States: “Little Taipei” or the “Chinese Beverly Hills.” We trace the language struggle from an abortive attempt to declare Official English in 1986 to electoral support for Proposition 63, the state’s Official English amendment later in the same year, to compromises on city codes regulating the use of Chinese business signs in 1989. It is a story of initial polarization and conflict, followed by a lessening of language struggles and accommodation to the realities of a multiethnic community.

A city of 62,000 residents located just east of Los Angeles in the populous San Gabriel Valley, Monterey Park exemplifies the kinds of economic, demographic, and political changes that could fuel nativistic reactions to immigration. In 1960 the town’s population was 85 percent Anglo (non-Hispanic white), 12 percent Latino, and 3 percent Asian. By 1980 the accelerated arrival of second- and third-generation Chicanos (Americans of Mexican descent), Nisei (second-generation Japanese Americans), and Asian immigrants had changed the ethnic makeup of the city to 25 percent Anglo, 39 percent Latino, and 35 percent Asian. During the 1980s these proportions continued to change.

31. Besides being a young, upscale Cuban American, the yuca is a starchy tuber that is a staple of the Cuban diet.