

BABEL IN AMERICA; OR,
THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE DIVERSITY
IN THE UNITED STATES

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Reprinted for private circulation from
CRITICAL INQUIRY

Autumn 1993, Volume 20, Number 1

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PRINTED IN U.S.A.

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What really is the language of the United States?

The common American response to this question is to dismiss it as outlandishly naive and as lacking cultural or political significance. After all, isn't the United States, that land of immigrants, fundamentally English-speaking, or essentially anglophone? Didn't founder John Jay, for example, insist in the *Federalist Papers* "that Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country, to one united people . . . speaking the same language"?¹ And isn't America's linguistic union one of the great historical feats of social language-engineering?²

The familiar rhetoric of inevitable linguistic union ranges from the humorous to the imperialistically oppressive. ("Melting pot, yes. Tower of Babel, no!" is the saying.)³ And it still informs manifestly most studies

1. John Jay writes "that Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country, to one united people; a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion" (Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers: A Collection of Essays Written in Support of the Constitution of the United States*, ed. Roy P. Fairfield [Garden City, N.Y., 1966], p. 6).

2. In this essay, I use the terms *America* and *United States* as near synonyms while at the same time examining the international and intranational political significance of how the rhetoric of the term *American*—indicating here the English language as spoken in the United States—takes the part for the whole (the United States for the Americas North and South, for example) or the one for the many (anglophone unilingualism for plurilingualism).

3. Saul Bellow is perhaps wrongly reported to have said this about the goals of U.S. English, a group bent on making English the one and only official language of the U.S. Bellow has said that he is not a member of U.S. English (quoted in S. I. Hayakawa, *One*