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The Delusion of Official English: A Policy Brief on Executive Order 14224, *Designating English as the Official Language of The United States*

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Abstract

This policy brief focuses on Presidential Executive order 14224, *Designating English as the Official Language of The United States*. The president does not have the authority to declare a national language. However, the majority of media coverage and national discussion about this order has focused on arguments for or against Official English itself rather than a president's (lack of) authority to declare it. Although opposition to this order has accurately described the negative impacts of Official English, we caution that opposing the content of the order, rather than its actual legitimacy, paradoxically grants the order an authority it does not have. Our goal in this policy brief is to outline the limited jurisdiction of this order, so it may not be illegally used to undermine bilingual education and multilingual thriving in the United States more broadly. However, while the order itself is largely impotent, the racism undergirding Official English is not. Therefore, this brief also highlights how racism manifests through Official English, and how, if left unchecked, such racism might imbue this order with impacts far exceeding its legal scope.

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Introduction

On March 1st, 2025, the Office of U.S. President Donald Trump issued an executive order, *Designating English as the Official Language of The United States* (Exec. Order No. 14224, 2025). The president does not have the authority to declare a national

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language (which would take an act of Congress to impose; see Cuevas Ingram & D'Avanzo, 2025). However, the majority of media coverage and national discussion has focused on arguments for or against Official English itself rather than a president's (lack of) authority to declare it. Opposition to this order has accurately described the negative potential impacts of Official English (e.g. Center for Applied Linguistics, 2025; National Association for Bilingual Education, 2025). Yet, we caution that opposing the content of the order, rather than its actual legitimacy, paradoxically grants the order an authority it does not have.

Despite its illegitimacy, misinterpretations of this order and the government's authority to enforce it, if left unopposed, will have major consequences for multilingual education and communities writ large. Therefore, our goal in this policy brief is to outline the limited jurisdiction of this order, so it may not be illegally used to undermine bilingual education and multilingual thriving in the United States more broadly. We argue that this order, despite having deleterious impacts within specific federal agencies, largely represents an act of political theatre—a forced delusion—especially when put up against existing federal law. For example, this order does not limit the language of instruction that can be used in schools, take away the legal responsibility of schools to communicate with parents in a language they understand, nor create any necessity for educators to police student or family language use that is not English. Thus, we argue, English is not the official language of the United States unless individuals grant the president the authority to declare it so by acquiescing to illegitimate executive overreach.

While the order itself is largely impotent, the racism undergirding Official English is not, nor is the discursive power of a purported “national language,” however delusional. Therefore, we begin by contextualizing how racism manifests through Official English, and how, if left unchecked, such racism might imbue this executive order with impacts far exceeding its legal scope.

The Historical Racism of Official English

The United States has never had an official national language, and monolingual English use has never been the sole linguistic practice contemporarily or historically of all colonial settlers, Indigenous communities, immigrants, nor enslaved populations (Kloss, 1998). Multilingualism has, in fact, been such a foundational feature of the United States that declaring an official language has long been viewed as government overreach and an encroachment on individual freedom of speech (Linguistic Society of America, 2025). Nevertheless, political pendulum swings have resulted in occasional calls for the country to declare Official English, particularly during periods of high immigration and White “replacement” anxiety (the fear of immigration creating the context for White people to be “replaced”; Crawford, 2013; Day, 2024). Such racial fearmongering arises despite the well-documented fact that immigrants to the United

States embrace English to such a high degree that heritage languages are often lost for subsequent generations (Portes & Hao, 1998). Thus, if the country has any language problem to be solved via government policy, it would be its reputation as a language graveyard (Rumbaut, 2009) with ardent monolingualism disadvantaging many of its citizens against a multilingual global majority (Grosjean, 2010).

And yet, propositions for Official English continuously arise alongside spikes in racialized xenophobia related to immigration. Between 1980 and the early 2000s, an era that correlated with increased immigration from Latin America, 28 states opted, for the first time since their founding, to designate English as the official state language. Today, with media and political messaging purporting a “crisis” at the southern U.S. border (Gooding, 2025), calls for Official English have predictably rebounded. With over 91% of the population reporting full fluency in English (Mukherjee & Lopez, 2025), the rise of Official English proposals consistently appear to correlate more with White racial anxiety than with linguistic fact.

This sets the foundation for the particular racism of the 2025 order, *Designating English as the Official Language of The United States*. In its preamble, the order states that “a policy of encouraging the learning and adoption of our national language will make the United States a shared home and empower new citizens to achieve the American dream” (Exec. Order No. 14224, 2025). However, the disingenuousness of this messaging was spotlighted within days of the order’s existence, as the administration moved to dismantle the Department of Education, all but eliminating its “Office of English Language Acquisition” (OELA), the entity tasked to support English Learning. It is well documented that school-based language support facilitates academic and civic participation for multilingual populations—particularly those who face overlapping forms of racial, linguistic, and class discrimination (Faltis & Valdés, 2016). To declare Official English, then subsequently dismantle support for learning it, suggests less interest in empowerment and more interest in subjugation of those who benefit from this support.

The Delusion of Official English

Complexifying this already tenuous landscape is the delusional nature of the order itself. Even if a president did have the authority to declare a national language, under existing federal law, language access is still protected under Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The act prohibits any recipient of federal funds from discriminating based on national origin, and the 1974 Supreme Court ruling in *Lau v. Nichols* clarified that this prohibition extends to discrimination based on English proficiency. Other laws also have explicit language access provisions, including the Affordable Care Act, Voting Rights Act, and FEMA disaster relief legislation (Cuevas Ingram & D’Avanzo, 2025). As these laws and cases take legal precedence over executive orders, Official English changes nothing about these requirements.

Even the Official English order itself clarifies that it changes very little. The order states that it repeals previous guidance that required federal agencies and those receiving federal funds to provide language-based assistance for accessing their programs. However, as the order states,

Nothing in this order... requires or directs any change in the services provided by any agency... heads are not required to amend, remove, or otherwise stop production of documents, products, or other services prepared or offered in languages other than English." (Exec. Order No. 14224, 2025)

In other words, beyond attempting to (illegitimately) declare Official English, the order is extremely limited in its scope. While we do not disregard the impact of no longer *requiring* federal agencies to provide language access, it is necessary to emphasize that federal agencies are still very much *allowed* to do so. Some may also interpret this order as having the authority to enshrine English as the official language of the executive branch and of federal agencies, presumably requiring official meetings and/or internal documentation to occur in English. However, there is no evidence to suggest that English is not *already* the language of such meetings and documentation. Even granting this interpretation, it is again important to emphasize this order in no way "bans" multilingualism in federal services, or anywhere else for that matter.

Combatting Illegitimacy through Policy Precision

It is essential for educators, researchers, and policymakers to understand, specifically, what this order does and does not achieve while it is in effect. Media coverage has largely (and inaccurately) ceded legitimacy to the president's ability to declare a national language. Headlines such as "Trump Made English the Official Language" (Healy, 2025) leave unquestioned his ability to do so. In the wake of such imprecision, numerous organizations released statements opposing the establishment of Official English (e.g., CAL, 2025; LSA, 2025; NABE, 2025; TESOL [Hutcheson, 2025]). While such statements have been carefully researched to accurately describe the negative impacts of Official English, arguing against Official English itself rather than the illegality of a president making such a declaration discursively grants the order a legitimacy that it does not have. If this pattern continues, the vast majority of the American public will simply assume that the president made a legitimate declaration and—whether or not they agree with the order—accept that English has indeed been made the official language of the United States and comply accordingly.

We have seen this kind of policy interpretation cycle before, when a handful of states passed so-called "English Only" education policies in the early 2000s (McField, 2014). Predicated upon similarly deceptive, racialized delusions as the Official English order, proponents of English Only education policies decried bilingual education as "a

disaster” for immigrant communities (Unz, 1997). Importantly, discussion and interpretation of the policy, even by those who opposed it, often led to much stricter implementation than the actual law required (see Chang-Bacon, 2022; Viesca, 2013). For example, it was largely believed that these laws forbade any use of languages other than English by teachers and students in classrooms (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). Yet, while these policies did stipulate the use of English materials and program structures (policies now widely recognized as uninformed and ineffective; see Arias & Faltis, 2012), the policies did not impose language bans on individuals. Still, the way these laws were described and oversimplified to “English Only” understandably led many teachers and administrators to believe that they were required to forbid students (and themselves) from speaking any other language in the classroom, going far beyond the restrictions of the actual policy.

In this way, it often matters less what a policy actually says and has the legal authority to accomplish as compared to what individuals *think* it says. As with previous restrictive language policies, the Official English order will likely be wielded by those looking to undermine bilingual education and bilingual speakers themselves in ways that are both linguistically marginalizing and racist. That is why these sorts of executive orders—even those with little to no enforceable legal basis—do, in fact, wield discursive power. At best, the Official English order is an act of political theatre. At worst, however, is the high likelihood that the order will be used to fuel harassment and the continued erosion of legal rights for multilingual individuals, particularly (and, we argue, by design) for racialized multilingual communities.

Recommended Responses to Performative Policies

So how should educators, policymakers, and citizens react to this order? Although, as we have shown, the Official English declaration is illegitimate, it must be recognized as such, and even then, must still be opposed. The declaration itself is a slogan, a rallying call to undermine the still-legal policies and programs that support bilingualism and multilingual individuals. The order, and future guidance based on this order, will almost certainly be used in ways that would negatively affect bilingual education and multilingual thriving.

As such, it is up to informed individuals, especially educators, to disrupt such disingenuous and, in many cases, illegal misuse of this order. For those already supporting multilingual language access, this can largely be achieved by simply continuing business as usual, particularly for those who aren’t specifically employed by a federal agency. In other words, schools, public services, and public spaces are in no way affected by this order. Furthermore, the order contains no “ban” on multilingual language usage, printed material, or individual speech in any shape or form.

At the same time, it is also necessary to recognize that, prior to this order, language accessibility was not the “norm” in the first place. With English hegemony already so pervasive, bilingual education so consistently marginalized, and multilingual individuals, especially in communities of Color, subject to potential harassment and extrajudicial scrutiny for their language practices, the very characteristics of this country that make Official English so redundant were those that already made it precarious for multilingualism and multilingual individuals to thrive. If this illegitimate executive order can serve as a rallying call for so many to oppose Official English, then renewed, organized action to support multilingual thriving could become this order’s actual enduring legacy. We call on the field, and the nation, to redouble support for multilingual education and multilingual communities in the wake of this blatant, and legally indefensible, attempt to coerce a nation into accepting the delusion of Official English.

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