Is speaking English a civic duty?

In today’s immigration countries, adherents of the “one nation, one language” idea face a unique ideological problem: to claim that the national language is a sign of national loyalty and incorporation into the nation while, simultaneously, disavowing any association between language and ethnicity and/or race. As long as racism was an acceptable form of bigotry, language didn’t really matter all that much because you were either tied to the nation “by blood” or you weren’t. If you weren’t, it didn’t even matter if you spoke the national language as a mother tongue because you simply didn’t belong.

In contemporary Western democracies, references to blood relationships as a basis for national belonging have become distasteful to everyone except the far-right fringe. However, that doesn’t mean that the idea of privileged access to the nation has gone away — it has just gone underground and, in the process, become more fractured.

Instead, language has become the new boundary marker of who is in and who is out.

One way to turn language into a legitimate-sounding boundary marker is to hype the incidence of residents who do not speak English and to malign them as linguistic freeloaders, as Deborah Cameron shows with reference to the UK.

An article in the most recent issue of the Journal of Sociolinguistics explores how members of the US Congress tackle the same problem. The researcher, Nicholas Subtirelu (who blogs at Linguistic Pulse) used a combination of critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to analyse the 2006 congressional debate concerning the re-authorization of a portion of the Voting Rights Act, which mandates that election materials need to be printed in languages other than English in districts where population thresholds of other-language speakers are reached. This provision is referred to as “Section 203.” First enacted in 1965 to eliminate the disenfranchisement of non-English speakers, it has been controversial ever since and therefore needs to be regularly extended by congress. The most recent extension occurred in 2006 and it is the congressional debate that occurred on that occasion that forms the corpus for analysis.

It is particularly speakers who argue against the extension of the provision — many of them well-known for their anti-immigration stances — who need to rhetorically navigate the tension between English as a marker of national identity but not a marker of ethnicity. As a result, they work hard to construct English as a marker not of ethnic belonging but of civic belonging.

An example comes from the chairman of US English, Mauro Mujica, who was invited to testify. In his testimony he extolls speaking English as a form of civic and patriotic virtue:

When a person steps into a voting booth, he or she is exercising the highest civic duty. Yet, at that very moment the government sends a signal that English is not really necessary to join our National political conversation. Ironically, this message will not be sent to the Spanish speaker in Burlington, Vermont or the Chinese speaker in Wichita, Kansas. It will be sent only to those who live in high enough language concentrations to trigger Section 203’s requirements. In short, it will be sent to the very immigrants who are
Likely to live in linguistic enclaves where an English-optional lifestyle is a real possibility. (Quoted in Subtirelu 2013, p. 54)

Doing your civic duty means engaging in the life of your community and contributing to the common good: volunteer fire-fighters are often seen as the ideal example of doing your civic duty. Volunteer fire-fighting, like most other forms of civic participation, occurs on the local level, “in linguistic enclaves where an English-optional lifestyle is a real possibility,” if you will.

Participating in elections, too, is a civic duty – as it is a civic right. However, in contrast to volunteer fire-fighting, voting requires participation not in a local community but in an imagined community. Promoting English as a civic duty only makes sense if you delink civic participation from the local and tie it exclusively to the national level.

In the process, it is not only the meaning of speaking English that is transformed but also the meaning of civic participation. From being inextricably linked to participation in the real life of a real community, it becomes individualized. This is particularly clear in those arguments that contrast “good” immigrants with their opposites. The following example is a case in point. Here a “good” individual immigrant from Russia who does his duty because he speaks “good” English is contrasted with the community of Chinatown. Chinatown residents are implicitly coded as shirkers who fail to do their linguistic and national duty.

I just recently came from San Francisco. I was in Chinatown, and we talk about the enclaves. On my way to the airport I rode with a Russian immigrant who spoke probably as good English as I, though with an accent. And I asked him about Chinatown and he said they don’t speak English there. You can’t live there unless you are Chinese. And in walking in the streets, I heard all the young Chinese students speaking Chinese. That may work in San Francisco, but that would not work in Iowa. In order to participate in the community, you must speak English. (Quoted in Subtirelu 2013, p. 53)

The example is patently absurd: an obviously existing community group is exhorted “to participate in the community.”

It is exactly these kinds of absurdities that result from trying to argue that discriminating on the basis of language is not discriminatory.