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---

### ☐ VOLUME 37 (2018)

---

Issue 4 (Jun 2018) , pp. 321-427  
Special Issue: Profess...

Issue 3 (May 2018) , pp. 225-320

Issue 2 (Mar 2018) , pp. 123-223  
Special Issue: Multili...

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### ☐ VOLUME 36 (2017)

---

Issue 6 (Nov 2017) , pp. 679-761

Issue 5 (Sep 2017) , pp. 533-677  
Special Issue: In Hono...

Issue 4 (Jul 2017) , pp. 359-531  
Special Issue: Young c...

Issue 3 (May 2017) , pp. 215-357

Issue 2 (Mar 2017) , pp. 125-213

Issue 1 (Jan 2017) , pp. 1-122

[< Previous Article](#)   [Next Article >](#)

# We have room for but one language here: Language and national identity in the US at the turn of the 20th century

**Aneta Pavlenko**

**Published Online:** 2006-01-23 | **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1515/mult.2002.008>

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# 'We have room for but one language here': Language and national identity in the US at the turn of the 20th century

ANETA PAVLENKO

## *Abstract*

*The purpose of this paper is to offer a tentative historiography of the emergence of one language ideology, that of English as the one and only language of American national identity. I will examine the appearance and growth of this ideology from the 18th to the 20th century, ending with the post-World War I period when three discourses, that of Americanization, that of Anglicization, and that of Anglo-Saxonization, came together suggesting to newly arriving European immigrants that in order to become loyal Americans they should absorb Anglo-Saxon cultural traditions and speak only English. I will also argue that while the linguistic assimilation of European immigrants eventually became a part of the American national identity narrative, the enforced nature of this assimilation was conveniently 'written out' of the story. As a result, children and grandchildren of European immigrants came to see language maintenance and loss as private issues, disconnected from larger sociopolitical contexts.*

## **0. Introduction**

In the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks, American national identity is once again at the center of a fierce controversy. It is not surprising that a national crisis of such magnitude would call for the consolidation of a patriotic image of a 'real American' – history has taught us that all major national crises entail a similar renegotiation of who 'counts', who 'fits in', and whose voice gets heard. The anti-German hysteria engendered by World War I, merged with anti-immigrant xenophobia, challenged the legitimacy of hyphenated – and multilingual – Americans. World War II and the Pearl Harbor attack rekindled the fear of 'foreign elements' within and led to restrictions on civil liberties of Japanese-Americans, many of whom had lived in the country for generations. Now, in a hauntingly *déjà-vu*-like fashion, the general public ques-

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