
LANGUAGES AND THE U.S. FEDERAL CONGRESS:
ATTITUDES, POLICIES AND PRACTICES BETWEEN
1789 AND 1815

SÁNDOR CZEGLÉDI
czegledi@almos.uni-pannon.hu

The present paper examines the link between language and cultural identity by exploring the language-related attitudes, policies and ideologies as reflected in the written records of the U.S. Federal Congress from 1789 until roughly the end of the “Second War of Independence” in 1815. The results are compared and contrasted with the findings of a previous study which examined the founding documents of the United States from a similar perspective. The most salient language policy development of the post-1789 period is the overall shift from the symbolic, general language-related remarks towards the formulation of more substantive and general policies.

Keywords: United States; Congress; language policy; language ideology; identity construction

1 Introduction

The analysis of language-related remarks and language policy (LP) initiatives in the key national-level legislative documents of the pre-1789 period in the United States reveals that the clash of values between “national unity” and “equality” was not yet present in the early legislative and nation-building discourse (Czeglédi 2018, 134). Despite the fact that, for example, the *Federalist Papers* favored the idea of national unity and the creation of a strong central government, these principles were not translated into actionable calls for assimilationist legislation trying to limit or eliminate multilingualism. Traces of possible attempts to officialize English (or any other language) cannot be found in the official documents of the era: all things considered, there appeared to be an aversion to the formulation of general and substantive, national-level language policies. It does not mean, however, that contemporary legislators were absolutely reluctant to express their opinion about linguistic diversity: symbolic statements emphasizing the mission of the English language as a common bond between Americans and prophecies highlighting its expected role in facilitating rapprochement with Britain were not uncommon among the unofficial remarks.

Overall, genuine language policies were mostly specific and substantive in the Confederation period, geared towards the facilitation of international communication, negotiations, and treaty-making. Therefore, the role of the French language turned out to be dominant, which was also reinforced by contemporary American propaganda campaigns towards Quebec. Foreign languages in general (and German in particular) also appeared to be crucial: the German language—somewhat similarly to French—proved to be indispensable for domestic “soft power” campaigns as well. These included the publicization of the causes and aims of the American Revolution intended to rally German-Americans behind the cause—and also to persuade German-speaking, British-hired mercenaries to switch sides (Czeglédi 2018, 133–135).

The present analysis continues the exploration of overt and covert language ideologies and documented policy proposals during the second major phase of American nation-building from 1789 to the end of the “Second War of Independence” with Britain in 1815, focusing on the activities of the federal legislature. The examined 26-year-long period spans thirteen Congresses (from 1789 to 1815) and coincides with the presidencies of George Washington (2 terms), John Adams, Thomas Jefferson (2 terms) and the first half of James Madison’s second term. These years witnessed the doubling of the territory and the population of the United States and the decline of the First Party System, which eventually ushered in the Era of Good Feelings as the Federalists were losing their power base, leadership and political influence.

While incumbent presidents rarely addressed language-related matters until the 1820s—the first genuine LP-proposal came from Millard Fillmore in 1851, who suggested using Plain English for the text of the laws (Czeglédi 2019, 191)—their private or (semi-)official correspondence before or after the presidential tenure may nevertheless provide clues about their language-related views.

By and large, Federalist politicians, who mostly favored the idea of a strong central government, had generally been more receptive to the thought of regarding English to be a (or “the”) unifying force, a social glue—as mentioned e.g. in *The Federalist Papers: No. 2*. Federalists occasionally even suggested implementing national-level language planning, including the ultimately unsuccessful proposal to set up an American Language Academy in 1780. Future president John Adams believed that “the form of government has an influence upon language, and language, in its turn, influences not only the form of government, but the temper, the sentiments, and manners of the people” (Adams 1780, 45).

Anti-Federalists (later: Democratic-Republicans or Jeffersonian Republicans) were not very far from the Federalist views in this regard. Although they criticized heavily the pro-British, pro-“big government,” and anti-immigrant policies of the Federalists

(especially while the Republicans were in opposition), Jefferson also believed in the unifying power of English. In a letter to James Monroe, while musing about the possibility (or rather: necessity) of territorial expansion due to “rapid multiplication,” he envisioned that the United States one day might “cover the whole Northern, if not the Southern continent with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, & by similar laws” (Jefferson 1801). Almost a decade later, after leaving the White House, Jefferson—despite his pro-French sympathies—acknowledged that “Our laws, language, religion, politics, & manners are so deeply laid in English foundations, that we shall never cease to consider their history as a part of ours, and to study ours in that as its origin” (Jefferson 1810). Nevertheless, centralized language planning was an unacceptable proposition for the ex-president: in a letter to the linguist and grammar book writer John Waldo, Jefferson argued that one should “appeal to Usage, as the arbiter of language” since “Purists... would destroy all strength & beauty of style, by subjecting it to a rigorous compliance with their rules” (Jefferson 1813). As far as foreign and classical languages were concerned, Jefferson proved to be a great friend of language learning, yet he was at least ambivalent toward the intergenerational transmission of minority languages (see e.g. Schmid 2001, 16; Pavlenko 2002, 168).

2 Aims, Corpus, and Method

As opposed to the relatively little available documentary evidence concerning presidential attitudes towards languages during the examined period, the records of the Federal Congress offer a more comprehensive insight into contemporary language ideologies. The federal-level legislative activities of the examined period between March 4, 1789 to March 3, 1815 (from the first through the thirteenth US Congress) are covered by the *House Journal* (hereafter cited as HJ); the *Senate Journal* (SJ); the *Senate Executive Journal* (SEJ); *Maclay’s Journal* (MJ) (the journal of William Maclay, United States Senator from Pennsylvania, 1789–1791); and the *Annals of Congress* (AC).

The corpus of the analysis was built with the help of these five major documentary sources available online as part of the “American Memory Collection” of the Library of Congress at <https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lawhome.html>. The final corpus includes all the records containing the word “language” and/or “languages” in the five databases—with the exception of those instances that simply refer to a particular choice of words or language use by a person or a document.

The analysis remains largely at “macro” (i.e.: national) level in that it does not try to trace how policies were interpreted and appropriated in particular meso- or

micro-contexts, yet attempts are made to explore the “ideological and discursive context” for the policies (Johnson 2013, 124). In order to gauge the scope and potential impact of language-related references that may range from informal, individual remarks to enforceable national policies, I propose the application of a Language Policy Spectrum Framework (LPSF) with four quadrants:

	<i>Symbolic</i>	<i>Substantive</i>
<i>General</i>		
<i>Specific</i>		

Table 1. Language Policy Spectrum Framework (Source: author)

The two quadrants on the left side represent symbolic policies, defined in the public policy context by James E. Anderson as policies that “have little real material impact on people”; “they allocate no tangible advantages and disadvantages”; rather, “they appeal to people’s cherished values” (Anderson 2003, 11). For example, language-related remarks without the policy-setting dimension that belong to the area of “folk linguistics” are classified as “symbolic.” On the other hand, substantive policies (the right quadrants) “directly allocate advantages and disadvantages, benefits and costs” (Anderson 2003, 6).

The “general” vs. “specific” criteria hinge on the scope of the policy, statement, or opinion in question. National-level policies or sweeping, stereotypical statements about languages are definitely considered “general”; whereas policies affecting one single language in one particular situation (or one single individual, for example, a translator or an interpreter) are classified as “specific.” In this analysis, language policies applied to territories or newly-forming states are considered to be “general” and “specific” at the same time, recognizing the long-term national-level precedential potential of these decisions. Today’s most controversial LP-related laws, proposals, executive orders, and regulations (including, for instance, the provision of multilingual ballots, the federal-level

English language officialization attempts, and Executive Order 13166, designed to improve minority access to government services) belong to the top right quadrant; therefore, they are “substantive” and “general” in nature.

In order to fine-tune the results, the language-related references in the corpus are classified on the basis of additional criteria. First, they are grouped whether they affect the English language (“English”), foreign languages (“FL”), immigrant minority languages (“Min. L.”), Native American languages (“Nat. Am.”), or classical languages (“Clas. L.”), acknowledging the fact that the distinction between “foreign” and “immigrant minority” languages is extremely vague in certain cases.

Next, the elements of the corpus are also examined according to LP types, using Wiley’s analytical framework, which divides the spectrum of LPs into “Promotion”-, “Expediency”-, “Tolerance”-, “Restriction”-, and “Repression”-oriented policies (Wiley 1999, 21–22). The current analysis regards “translation” as an “Expediency”-oriented policy.

Finally, the language-related references and policy proposals are compared to Ruiz’s tripartite “orientations,” as to whether the language or languages in question are treated as a “Problem”—linked with “poverty, handicap, low educational achievement, little or no social mobility” (Ruiz 19); whether they appear in the “Language-as-Right” context—associated with the option of granting linguistic access to government services (in an “Expediency”-oriented way); or whether they are regarded as assets, emphasizing their national security, diplomatic, economic value. The latter attitude is identified by Ruiz as a “Language-as-Resource” orientation (Ruiz 1984, 28). Although Ruiz’s orientations scheme is more than three decades old now, Francis M. Hult and Nancy H. Hornberger convincingly argue for its continuing usefulness as an analytical heuristic (2016, 48).

3 Findings and Discussion

3.1 General Overview

After removing duplicates and irrelevant records according to the exclusion criteria identified above from the 72 document pages that contain the search term “language,” there remain 45 instances with either symbolic or substantive LP relevance in the corpus. As illustrated below, all of them were recorded between 1779 and 1813, the peak year being 1804 in terms of sheer frequencies.

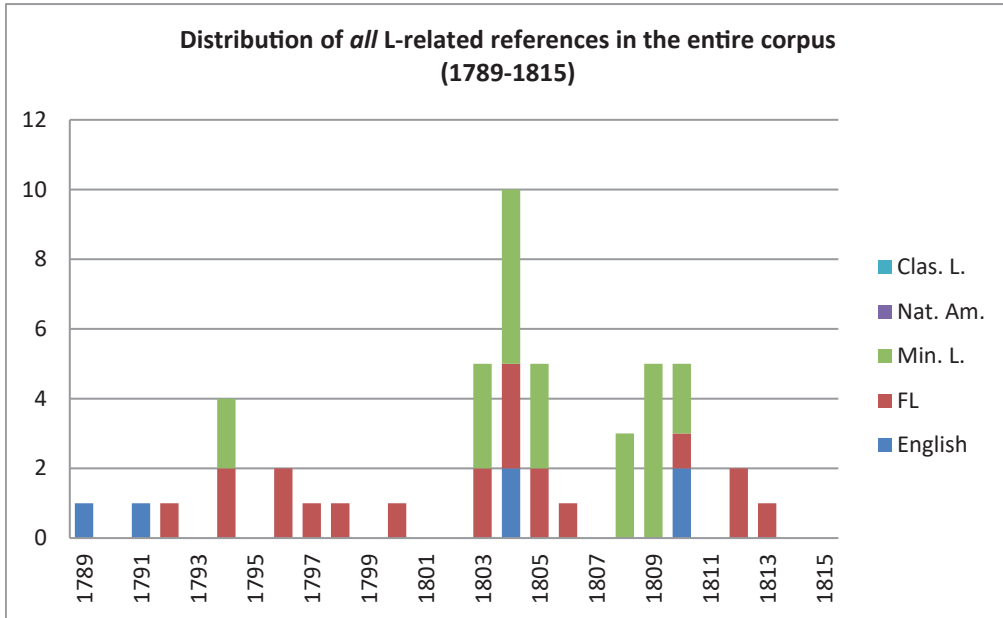


Figure 1. Chronological distribution of all relevant references in the entire corpus from 1789 to 1815
(Source: author)

Language-related discourses were dominated by minority and foreign languages during the examined period. English was given relatively little attention, while references to classical languages and Native American languages did not appear at all, despite the federal government’s continued policy to buy Indian lands, to “civilize” the inhabitants—and to wage wars that culminated in Tecumseh’s Rebellion in the 1810s. Apparently, no LP-ramifications of these conflicts can be identified today, relying on the records of the Federal Congress alone.

References to the English language were relatively rare: 6 records altogether. There were two symbolic remarks by William Maclay, one stating that, with the exception of the English, “foreigners do not understand our language” (MJ, Ch. I, 1789, 28). The other, more ominous prediction from 1791 foresaw rapprochement with Britain—and also envisioned the concomitant deterioration of the relations with France: “ours was a civil war with Britain, and that the similarity of language, manners, and customs will, in all probability, restore our old habits and intercourse, and that this intercourse will revive... our ancient prejudices against France” (MJ, Ch. XVI, 1791, 407).

Almost two decades later, an individual petition by a French artillery officer who had aided American naval operations in Tripoli reached the House floor. The veteran soldier—having relocated to the United States—requested financial aid

from Congress that “will enable him to subsist until he can acquire a knowledge of the American language” (HJ 1810, March 8, 271).

Clearly, these symbolic remarks and the specific request by an individual cannot be considered as binding, general policies. On the other hand, from 1804 onward, due to the territorial expansion of the United States, the language issue assumed center stage, this time in the context of Louisiana.

3.2 Language Policies for Louisiana

At the time of the Louisiana Purchase, the Francophone population of the area consisted primarily of the Creoles (descendants of the French settlers) and the Acadians, whose ancestors were expelled from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick during the Seven Years War. As Sexton notes, Creoles often were members of the landed elite and they were literate—as opposed to the majority of the predominantly rural Acadians/Cajuns (2000, 26). The original French immigrants to Louisiana mostly “belonged to a good class of society, and the language spoken by them was pure and elegant” (Fortier 1884, 96). After the Seven Years War, Louisiana was transferred to Spanish authority in 1763, yet loyalty to the French language remained strong: Spanish officials routinely married ladies of French descent, and the children naturally acquired the “mother tongue” (Fortier 1884, 97). Heinz Kloss also notes that although German-Americans were “above average” in terms of language retention in the US, “the French were the most persistent” (1977/1998, 17).

After a brief reestablishment of French rule in 1800, Napoleon was forced by his military setbacks in the Caribbean to sell the territory to the US in 1803. Territorial purchase—the first of this kind in the history of the young republic—immediately presented Jefferson with serious constitutional and ethical dilemmas. Although the Senate eventually ratified the purchase with an overwhelming majority, the opinion of the Cajun and Creole settlers about joining the US was never asked. Nevertheless, the Louisiana Purchase Treaty of 1803 guaranteed that the inhabitants of the ceded territory

...shall be incorporated in the Union of the United States and admitted as soon as possible according to the principles of the federal Constitution to the enjoyment of all these rights, advantages and immunities of citizens of the United States, and in the mean time they shall be maintained and protected in the free enjoyment of their liberty, property and the Religion which they profess (“Louisiana Purchase Treaty,” 1803, Art. III)

Language rights, however, were not mentioned explicitly, and as it turned out, they were practically denied for years to come. Louisiana was divided along the 33rd parallel into the (strategically more important) “Orleans Territory” (corresponding

roughly to the present-day state in terms of geographical location) and the rest of the area became the “District of Louisiana” (later “Louisiana Territory,” then “Missouri Territory” after 1812).

In response to the heavy-handed policies of the federal government (which also included the appointment of an English-speaking governor with dictatorial powers), and limitations on the importation of slaves, the inhabitants of Orleans Territory sent to Congress the list of their grievances in the form of the “Louisiana Memorial” of December 1804 (also known as Louisiana Remonstrance). The drafters of the document also protested the “introduction of a new language into the administration of justice, the perplexing necessity of using an interpreter for every communication” (aggravated by the contemporary coexistence of French, Spanish and American legal practices), and “the sudden change of language in all the public offices” (“Louisiana Memorial” 1804). Apparently, as the very same document notes, the Spanish had been more considerate in this regard, as they were “always careful in their selection of officers, to find men who possessed our language and with whom we could personally communicate.” These protests fell on deaf ears in Congress, yet as the population grew, a more representative government system was set up according to the principles laid down by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. Nevertheless, when Louisiana was admitted as a regular state in 1812 on the basis of the Enabling Act of 1811, its first constitution was written in the spirit of English-only, specifying that “All laws... and the public records of this State, and the judicial and legislative written proceedings of the same, shall be promulgated, preserved and conducted in the language in which the constitution of the United States is written” despite the fact that “a strong French majority still existed” in the state at the time (Kloss 1977/1998, 112). To the contrary, the 1845 state constitution was to recognize the French language as quasi-co-official, but this magnanimity disappeared after the Civil War, only to return briefly after 1879. (For a more in-depth analysis, see e.g. Kloss 1977/1998, 107–115).

The records of the federal legislature in the examined period reflected these LP struggles to a certain degree. On March 17, 1804, a language restrictionist, general and substantive resolution appeared in the House Journal, which required that “all evidences of title and claims for land within the territories ceded by the French Republic to the United States” should be registered “in the language used in the United States” (HJ 1804, March 17, 661). This motion, however, was ordered to lie on the table. When a modified version appeared in the House Journal in November of the same year, the relevant linguistic requirement allowed the registration of the claims “in the original language, and in the language used in the United States” (HJ 1804, Nov. 23, 22–23). This version was referred to a committee, but it is not known whether it was ever reported out. Simultaneously, however, the Louisiana

Memorial was already on its way to Congress, which might have influenced the more minority language-friendly amendment of the resolution.

Nonetheless, the last English language-related record in the corpus defined general, substantive policies regarding the future state of Louisiana (i.e. “Territory of Orleans”). Following Henry Clay’s motion in the Senate, the eventual Louisiana Enabling Act of 1811 specified that after admission into the Union “the laws which such state may pass shall be promulgated, and its records of every description shall be preserved, and its written, judicial, and legislative proceedings conducted, in the language in which the laws... of the United States are now published” (SJ 1810, April 20, 497). This decision was later incorporated into the new state’s constitution, putting a temporary end to the language-related battles in the territory, which had started with the Louisiana Purchase and were to continue for more than a century after achieving statehood in 1812.

3.3 Symbolic References and Substantive Policies

Altogether, there were only two symbolic references in the examined corpus (both referring to the English language by William Maclay, as discussed in 3.1), which signals an even more practical-minded turn in legislative attitudes than the one observed with respect to the 1774–1789 corpus, especially after 1787 (Czeglédi 2018, 134).

The 1789–1815 corpus is dominated by substantive references and proposed policies (although the majority were rejected or postponed indefinitely):

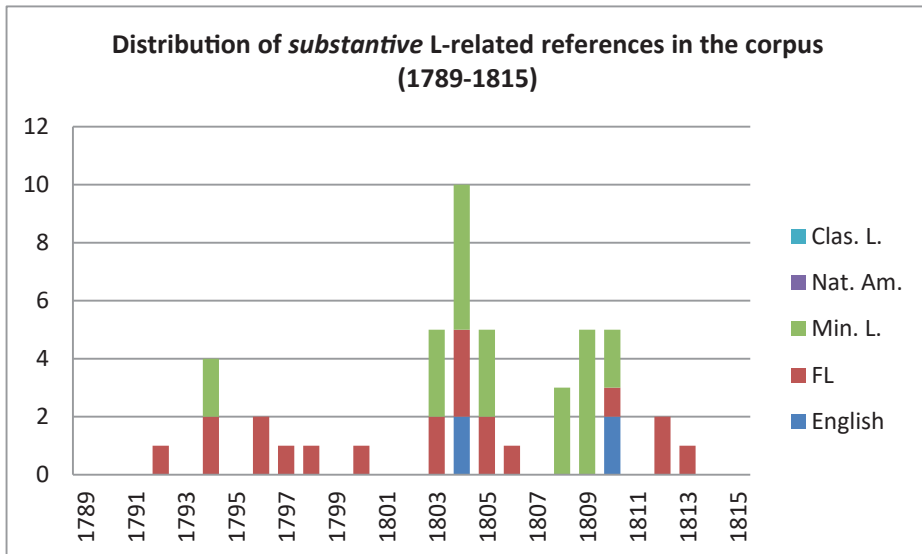


Figure 2. Chronological distribution of substantive references in the entire corpus from 1789 to 1815

(Source: author)

Following a 5-year period of virtual *laissez faire*-orientation, substantive proposals returned after 1792, then culminated in 1803–05 and 1809–10, focusing on minority and foreign languages. The English language appeared three times in substantive, general proposals, the last of which was passed by Congress and became the Louisiana Enabling Act of 1811 (see 3.2).

Out of the 43 substantive proposals, 13 were general as well, i.e. they could be classified as either state- (territory-) or federal-level decisions with potentially great impact as far as the number of people concerned and/or the precedential value entailed. These LP-proposals affected the status of the German and French languages—and mostly curtailed the linguistic rights of their speakers.

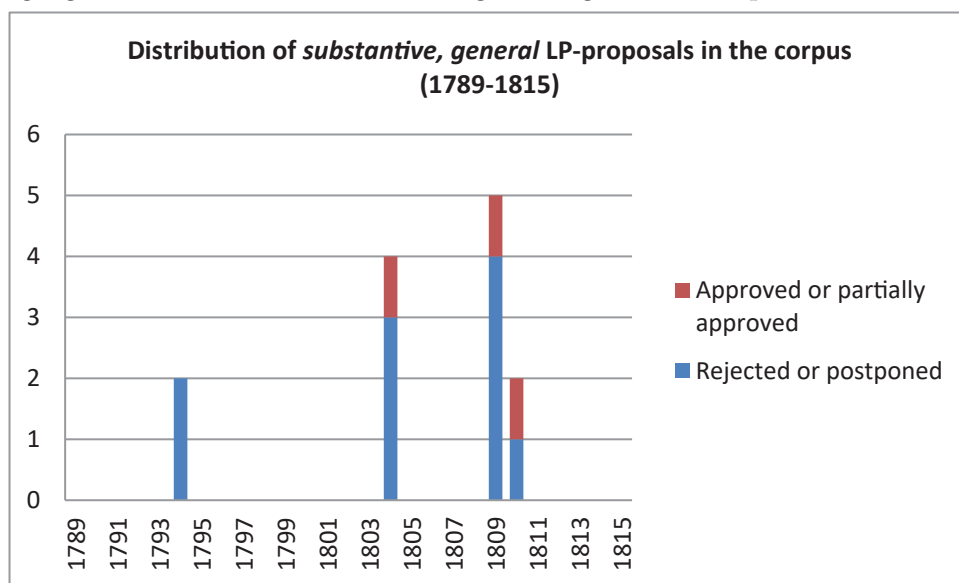


Figure 3. Chronological distribution of all *substantive, general* references in the entire corpus from 1789 to 1815 (Source: author)

The three (partially) approved proposals date back to 1804, 1809 and 1810. They include the apparent permission to register previous land claims on the territory of the Louisiana Purchase “in the original language, and in the language used in the United States” (HJ 1804, Nov. 23, 22–23), although the final decision (and the committee’s opinion) in that question was not recorded.

The second substantive, general proposal from 1809, which was passed at least by one chamber (this time by the Senate) focused on a petition “in the French language” by the French-speaking inhabitants of the Territory of Michigan requesting “a number of copies of the laws of the United States, particularly such of the said laws as relate to the Michigan Territory, to be printed in the French

language” (HJ 1809, Jan. 23, 484). Three weeks later, the same petition appeared on the Senate agenda as well (SJ 1809, Feb. 18, 384), and according to the Annals of Congress, it “was read a third time, and passed” (AC, 10th Cong., 2nd Sess., Senate, x). (The exact scanned page is not available in the online database, but it is page 455 in the original, printed document). The fate of the petition was less fortunate in the House: it was “postponed indefinitely” (AC, 10th Cong., 2nd Sess., House, xxxv), then the committee which it had been referred to issued a report “adverse to the petition” (AC, 11th Cong., 1st Sess., House, lxxiii).

The third approved substantive, general proposal was indeed passed by Congress and became known as part of the Louisiana Enabling Act of 1811, which (together with the first constitution of the state), made the state of Louisiana a *de jure* English-only state despite its Francophone majority. Consequently, the net effect of the three substantive, general proposals was to set the country on a path toward assimilationist LP-legislation, which tendency was later reinforced by the Reconstruction; the resurgence of nativism from the 1880s as a reaction to “new immigration”; and ultimately by the Great War, which discredited “hyphenated Americanism” in every form.

The rejected or (indefinitely) postponed substantive, general proposals mostly included the previous versions or the sister bills of the three approved proposals discussed above. An additional, unrelated petition came from the inhabitants of the Territory of “New [sic] Orleans” asking for allowing the “use of their native language in the legislative and judicial authorities” after acceding to statehood (HJ 1804, Nov. 29, 26–27). The petition arrived a few days before the Congressional reception of the Louisiana Memorial, which is dated to December 3 according to Lambert (2002, 201). No further information on the fate of this particular petition is available, but the request was certainly not granted either by the Enabling Act of 1811 or by the state constitution of 1812.

Similarly, the 1794 petition by “a number of Germans, residing in the State of Virginia... praying that a certain proportion of the laws of the United States may be printed in the German language” (HJ 1794, Jan. 9, 31) appeared in the House Journal twice (the second time on Nov. 28) but was rejected after a tie vote, which may have been broken by the Speaker, Frederick Augustus Conrad Muhlenberg (Kloss 1977/1998, 28). This attempt was not unique: a similar French petition was rejected in 1809 (see above), and a few likeminded, unsuccessful German attempts were to be made e.g. in 1835 (also resulting in an initial tie vote), then in 1843 and in 1862 (Kloss 1977/1998, 29–33). Perhaps partly due to the persistence of German minorities and to the propaganda machinery of the Fatherland, the Muhlenberg-incident was later blown out of proportion, giving rise to fanciful tales about German almost disestablishing English as the official language of the United States.

3.4 The Language Policy Spectrum Framework

The relevant corpus of language-related remarks and policy proposals can be classified according to the LP spectrum framework discussed in Section 2 into the following quadrants:

LP spectrum diagram 1789–1815

		Symbolic	Substantive
General	Eng. will facilitate reconciliation with GB		(Denying) the translation of laws into min. Ls; declaring Louisiana an English-only state
		2 Eng. 2	15 Min. Fr. 8 Eng. 3 Min. Fr.+Sp. 2 Min. Ger. 2
Specific			Petitions, translation (mostly in and from French)
		0	38 Min. Fr. 16 FL Fr. 4 FLs (unspec.) 7

Table 2. Distribution of LP-references in the corpus according to the LP spectrum framework (the numbers indicate the actual number of references in the given quadrant; Fr.=French; Sp.=Spanish; FLs=foreign languages) (Source: author)

The symbolic, general statements only included William Maclay's personal remarks about the English language (see 3.1), while the symbolic, specific quadrant remained empty. The 1774–89 corpus, on the other hand, contained 15 symbolic, general remarks (mostly about the nation-building and unifying role of the English language). The symbolic, specific quadrant had almost totally been empty a few decades before as well (Czeglédi 2018, 121).

Genuinely macro-level and binding policy proposals are associated with the top right, i.e. with the substantive, general quadrant. Here the major LP

approach to linguistic diversity turned out to be the discontinuation and denial of the previous policy of translating the laws of the United States into several minority languages. This new, assimilationist and problem-oriented attitude limited the rights of the French (Spanish) and German language-speaking populations, whose petitions to that effect were routinely rejected. The most sweeping (and hotly contested) decision in this quadrant was the total denial of minority language rights in Louisiana in official domains even after granting statehood to the Territory of Orleans (see 3.3). (No other state was to be declared *de jure* Official English on admission—but no other territory was allowed to become a state without a more or less clear English-speaking majority afterwards, either.) The greatest difference between the LP-profiles of the 1774–1789 and the 1789–1815 corpus can be found here: before 1789 (strictly speaking: before 1810) there had been no substantive, general LP-bills (or joint resolutions with the force of law) passed by the national legislature.

Substantive, specific policies included state- or territory-level initiatives (which were classified as belonging to both the general and specific categories—as stated in section 2) and the smaller-scale decisions that affected e.g. one single individual or a language in one particular or local situation. Typical examples of the latter included the appropriation of money to pay the “Clerk for Foreign Languages” in the Department of State (HJ 1792, Dec. 3, 640); negotiations conducted and documented in foreign languages (e.g. in French and Spanish as in the case of Pinckney’s Treaty (SEJ 1796, Feb. 26); grievances in French by French-speaking citizens of Indiana Territory complaining about “intrusion by citizens of the United States, on lands which the petitioners claim, under a title from certain Indian tribes” (HJ 1803, Feb. 11, 336–337); compensation for (French and Spanish) translators; and the appointment of a French language teacher to the Corps of Engineers (HJ 1803, Jan. 24, 299).

3.5 From Promotion to Repression: Types and Orientations

The application of Wiley’s analytical framework (21–22), which classifies LPs according to their effects on linguistic diversity, reveals that among the substantive, general proposals the promotion of English and the restriction of minority languages were the major themes of the proposals with the greatest real or potential impact. These included the declaration of Louisiana to function as an English-only state immediately after joining the U.S. and the eventual rejection of the request by the French-speaking inhabitants asking Congress to print the relevant laws of the U.S. in the French language. The similar, German request had also been rejected 15 years before. Limited tolerance was present in the 1804 decision allowing the

registration of previous land claims in the territory of the Louisiana Purchase in the original language as well, although the final decision on the issue was not recorded.

The substantive, specific practices and policies were predominantly expediency-oriented, focusing on the financing of translation and interpretation services, mostly affecting the French language. However, expediency did not extend to the provision of short-term, transitional minority-language accommodations (represented by e.g. today's multilingual ballots and transitional bilingual education models), as they did not exist at all 200 years ago. Consequently, expediency in the minority-language context could only be understood in a limited sense: it mostly meant the willingness of Congress to receive, translate and consider petitions in minority languages. The two symbolic, general statements about the English language had no policy implications at all.

According to Ruiz's orientations scheme, the treatment of minority languages in the examined period reflected an overall "problem"-orientation with a few ephemeral "language-as-right" gestures that were never codified nor always consistently practiced. One unquestionably present linguistic right was the possibility of petitioning Congress for the redress of grievances in non-English languages. Foreign languages (especially French), however, were recognized as diplomatic assets, but this appreciation was never applied to French (whether Creole or Cajun) in the minority-language context.

4 Summary and Conclusion

The fundamental question is whether the United States had had a language policy or at least language policies before 1815 on the basis of the available federal-level legislative documents. Incumbent presidents had not expressed their language-related opinions before the 1820s and neither had they proposed genuine policies before the 1850s (Czeglédi 2019, 191–192). This, however, did not mean that they always avoided addressing the topic as legislators, diplomats or private citizens. Both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson shared the belief in the unifying power of English—Adams was even convinced that language can be planned from above. Yet, no attempts were made and no proposals were recorded which would have tried to reintroduce the Language Academy idea after 1780 (Czeglédi 2018, 135). Similarly, the myths about officializing English (or another language) had no factual basis at all in the legislative documents before 1815.

Between 1774 and 1789, the dominant quadrant in the Language Policy Spectrum Framework (LPSF) was the one containing substantive, specific policies and practices, which mostly meant translation and interpretation into and from

French, German, Dutch and Spanish. Up to 1780, Congress had also translated laws and propaganda materials into German and French, then the practice was discontinued. Symbolic, general statements about the nation-building role of English were not uncommon, either.

After 1789, two major shifts can be detected on the basis of the LPSF data: the virtual disappearance of symbolic, general statements and the emergence of genuine policy proposals in the substantive, general quadrant. The first real instance of general language policymaking happened in the context of the Louisiana statehood debate: eventually, however, the “English-only” forces (practically: the federal legislature) won against the Creole and Cajun inhabitants of the territory, who demanded the enshrinement of French language rights.

Unless we count the numerous earlier, reactive instances when language rights were denied especially to the German and French minorities as a response to grassroots petitions, the first proactive, general and substantive LP decision by the U.S. Congress was the one that set the state of Louisiana on an officially assimilationist path for more than three decades.

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