

Resisting and Rewriting English-Only Policies: Navigating Multilingual, Raciolinguistic, and Translingual Approaches to Language Advocacy

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While language policies may be difficult to enact, they can be even more difficult to undo. When Frederick County, Maryland, repealed its English-only policy in 2015, for example, it marked the first community-driven repeal of its kind since 1993 in Miami-Dade County, Florida (Associated Press). This 22-year gap reflects the fact that while institutions may tacitly reinterpret language policies over time, or alter them due to external pressure (Dick), actively working against them from the inside is relatively rare. Many people and institutions remain committed to what Suresh Canagarajah calls a “monolingual orientation” towards language (20), and this commitment grants English-only policies a certain inertia. A monolingual orientation can make using only one language or language variety seem more natural, normal, correct, efficient, or otherwise authoritative than other ways of communicating. In a study that points to how pervasive this understanding of language is, Juan Guerra writes that over his forty-plus years of teaching diverse groups of college students across the country, the “most salient” pattern has been “the degree to which an overwhelming majority of the students in both groups have bought into the rigid ideologies of monolingualism and monoculturalism” (118). The persistence of this orientation is understandable, given the relationship between language and politics in the US. In and beyond the classroom, English-only policies often marginalize and conflate people of color, immigrants, people who do not use English, multilingual people, and people who use marked dialects and registers of English; and they glorify the figure of the white, monolingual citizen-taxpayer, or what David Bleeden, Caroline Gottschalk-Druschke, and Ralph Cintrón call “the hypercitizen” (179). Despite a robust body of work documenting and critiquing the monolingual orientation, there are few accounts of how people actually navigate and adopt policy alternatives.

This article draws on a recent ethnographic, discourse analytic study of local language policy in order to address that gap. I focus specifically on the campaign to repeal Frederick County’s English-only ordinance. Activists and politicians worked in concert to dismantle the ordinance, both in terms of actually passing a repeal bill and by marshaling community support more broadly. I find that people used three approaches to argue for resisting and rewriting their community’s English-only policy, each of which emerged from a particular, alternative orientation towards language: flipping the economics script (multilingual), linking language to race (raciolinguistic), and questioning the nature of English (translingual). At the same time, focusing on the economic benefits of

multilingualism nearly eclipsed the other approaches, with the end result that the policy text itself and the public discourse of the bill's two co-sponsors offered a more limited vision of language policy than the rest of the campaign and the interviews. Ultimately, I argue that there are advantages as well as risks to cultivating and combining multilingual, raciolinguistic, and translingual orientations towards language. The Frederick County campaign thus offers a critical window into how language policies emerge and change in practice and a possible model for future language advocacy.

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Monolingualism And Its Alternatives

Monolingualism is a global, multifaceted phenomenon that shapes how people approach language in and beyond writing studies. As Missy Watson and Rachael Shapiro argue, monolingualism typically refers to four intertwined phenomena in US contexts: “Standard Language Ideology,” “Tacit English-Only Policies,” “the Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity,” and the “Myth of Linguistic Uniformity, Stability, and Separateness.” While I would argue that English-only policies are often more explicit than tacit, I do adopt Watson and Shapiro’s definition of monolingualism as encompassing the ideas that Standard English is superior, that it should be the only official language, that it is the norm, and that it is a discrete object. These phenomena are not so much inherently connected as they are historically and politically connected. For much of US history, people have periodically sought to make English the only official language of civic life and education (Baron 185), particularly under the auspices of colonialism, racism, and xenophobia (Spack; Pavlenko). These policies have gained traction not just in government and K–12 education but also in higher education (Horner and Trimbur). Yu-Kyung Kang finds that even at a university that touts its commitment to diversity, “dominant monolingualism” persists (101), and the Korean students she studies come to embrace “quite traditional language ideologies,” like the association of one nation with one language (102).

Monolingual policies and ideologies matter not just because they are common but because they reflect and shape people’s views on both language and language users. In terms of language policy in the US, English-only discourse not only marginalizes other languages, but it also draws attention away from other aspects of communication. Instead of considering communication in all its nuance and complexity (including the roles of things like literacy, genre, rhetoric, repertoires, practices, and style), conversations about language lapse into judgments over whether someone has English, or they don’t, or whether they are literate in English, or not. Although my focus is on US policy, it is also important to emphasize that monolingual approaches are global (Lillis and Curry). For example, in a study of first-year writing in Lebanon, Nancy Bou Ayash writes that language use is often still “refracted through a monolingual structuring principle and regulated by the monolingualism of

academic gatekeepers” (555). The kinds of “structuring” and “regulat[ing]” that Ayash foregrounds can seriously limit how people learn, use, and view language.

Scholars have theorized several alternatives to the monolingual orientation. One possibility is a more multilingual orientation, which emphasizes the existence and the value of using multiple different languages. That orientation is foundational to bilingual education and other additive programs, like English Plus in the US, the European Union’s language policy, CCCC’s own 1988 National Language Policy (Wible, *Shaping* 89), and academic fields like second language writing (Jordan). However, additive approaches to language carry the risk of re-essentializing the languages and identities involved (Horner et al.). A more translanguaging approach offers a way to reconcile some of the issues with both monolingual and multilingual orientations (Canagarajah). Translanguaging theory has emerged in response to growing awareness that “language mixing is the norm and does not need explanation, that communication occurs across what have been thought of as languages, that speakers draw on repertoires of semiotic resources, and that language is best understood in terms of social practices” (Pennycook, “Mobile” 212). Communication in this framework is about drawing on a range of semiotic resources that transcend tidy categories.

However, neither multilingual nor translanguaging approaches tend to center identity and inequality. There are bodies of work that tackle questions of power more directly, particularly around race and racism. For example, scholars like Geneva Smitherman and Valerie Kinloch have focused on language rights, while others have begun to develop a new kind of “raciolinguistic” inquiry into how language and race shape each other (Flores and Rosa; Alim; Rosa and Flores). In the introduction to the first edited collection on raciolinguistics, H. Samy Alim describes how this emerging field stems from his work with Geneva Smitherman in *Articulate While Black* and aims to “ask and answer critical questions about the relations between language, race, and power across diverse ethn racial contexts and societies” (3). Raciolinguistics has the potential to name and bring together existing work, encourage future work on language and race, and connect conversations in writing studies to those in the related fields of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and education. This framework has not yet been widely adopted in literacy studies, which I see as a reflection of what Carmen Kynard calls the field’s “still-dominant white center” (63).

To be sure, I am not suggesting that raciolinguistics is completely distinct from theories of multilingualism and translanguaging. Indeed, some of the most fruitful work on language issues in the past decade has focused on how people could and should synthesize these different approaches. In his work on the promise of code meshing and the problems with code switching, for example, Vershawn Ashanti Young shows how “code switching is all about race” and is “steeped in a segregationist, racist logic” (51). More recently, scholars have pushed translanguaging theory to be more engaged in questions of race. Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner have tied translanguaging theory to questions of agency and matters of “racial and ethnic prejudice” (598). Keith Gilyard calls for acknowledging translanguaging performance while also centering linguistic competence, race, and rights. What I am suggesting is a need to build on such work, particularly in the form of inquiry into how people navigate these alternatives to the monolingual orientation in their advocacy work. In this article, I look to public policymakers and activists in order to answer the following question: how do people

resist and rewrite English-only policies?

Researching Language Policy In The Making

In designing this study, my aim was to capture the dynamism and complexity of language policy in the making. Language policy is not just about “stand-alone documents” (Wible, *Shaping* 169). Creating, circulating, and changing a policy involves a range of other texts, people, practices, events, organizations, and institutions. However, language policy has rarely been studied this way: Alastair Pennycook laments the “bland” nature of much of the existing research on the topic, which treats language policy as a stable, macro-level phenomenon (*Language* 54). Pennycook argues that “[w]e need to understand how language planning often builds on small local actions, on decisions made in communities, on local publications” (*Language* 54). Like Pennycook, I am interested in language policy as a local practice that emerges and unfolds over time and across situations. To take this more situated approach, I draw on methodologies of ethnography and discourse analysis. Synthesizing these methodologies into what I call ethnographic discourse analysis allows me to foreground people’s perspectives, to triangulate multiple kinds of data, and to reflect critically on my own role as a researcher (all hallmarks of ethnography); while also focusing specifically on how people use and view signs (as in sociocultural approaches to discourse analysis). This interdisciplinary approach is informed by Pennycook’s work in applied linguistics, as well as scholarship in the overlapping areas of situated studies of literate activity (Prior), ethnographies of writing (Lillis and Curry; Sheridan), discourse studies (Bakhtin; Wortham and Reyes), and sociocultural linguistics (Bucholtz and Hall).

This article is part of a larger IRB-approved study, in which I collected data on four Maryland counties that had proposed or passed English-only policies during 2008–2013, as well as the Washington, DC-based organizations ProEnglish and U.S. English. Frederick was the only county in the study to repeal its policy, but it is otherwise typical of English-only communities in terms of politics, economics, geography, and demographics. Compared to the rest of the United States, the population of Frederick County is relatively high-income, white, and likely to speak only English at home (US Census Bureau). After a local politician first proposed an English-only ordinance in 2008, the county government finally succeeded in passing a similar ordinance in 2012, thanks in part to the support of ProEnglish. The government used a lightly edited version of ProEnglish’s model template, as is common with contemporary English-only policies. In 2015, the County Council¹ passed a bill repealing that 2012 ordinance by a narrow margin, 4-3.

I collected data on Frederick County’s shifting language policy both online and through fieldwork. In 2012, when the county passed its English-only ordinance, I began collecting publicly available writing and video. Because contemporary language policy campaigns tend to be sources of controversy and matters of public record, they have a significant digital footprint. This discourse includes government records, organizations’ websites, news coverage, social media, and publicly accessible videos of government meetings and hearings. Then, beginning in 2015, I visited Maryland and interviewed 24 people; collected more policy texts and other records; took photographs; and wrote field notes. The people who shape language policy tend to be what Deborah Brandt terms

“everyday” writers, or those who may write prolifically and influentially, but who do not necessarily identify as writers or authors (12). These writers often work collaboratively and anonymously, which necessarily influenced how I recruited participants. I was interested in both the most public-facing policymakers and people who played more behind-the-scenes roles, and so I sought interview participants in three ways. First, I contacted all the politicians who had voted on the policies in question, as well as several people who had spoken at public hearings or written relevant blog posts or news articles. Second, I distributed a flyer describing the study to people I met and in several local businesses and libraries. Finally, I asked participants if there was anyone else they would recommend I interview. The interviews were semi-structured, and the questions were tailored to each person’s role and their prior public discourse on the topic. Participants had a high degree of control over whether their interview was connected to their real name or a pseudonym, whether and how I could record the interview, and whether and how I could share the contents of their interview. Ultimately, of the nine participants highlighted in this article, everyone requested that I use their real name, or the real name of their blog or social media profile, and consented to my recording the interview (one video, the rest audio).

Data analysis began with transcribing the audio/video interviews and footage of government meetings, with an eye towards transcribing not just people’s words but also non-verbal activities like laughter and gestures (in the case of video). Data analysis was a “recursive” process (Sheridan 76), as I continued to collect and compare data, take notes, follow up with participants, and revise my research questions. While this kind of iteration is typical of ethnographic writing research, the process was amplified by the fact that when the study began, Frederick County’s English-only policy seemed thoroughly entrenched, and so I only came to focus on questions of resisting and rewriting as the repeal campaign began. Finally, during the revisions stage, I sent a draft of this article to the participants for comment.

As a researcher in Frederick County, I was an outsider in ways that significantly shaped my findings. I had never spent time in Maryland (except Baltimore) or Washington, DC before this study. I am not a politician, activist, or blogger. This outsider position was not necessarily a problem. For example, once people realized I was unfamiliar with the area, they would go into greater detail about local history and politics, in a way that I doubt would have happened if we had shared more points of reference. On the other hand, I do not have the same perspective or access as someone studying their own local language policy (Tardy). I move now to the study’s findings, beginning with how people identified the potential value of multilingualism over monolingualism (see Figure 1 for a synopsis of the three approaches).

Approach	Criticisms of the English-only Policy	Orientation towards Language
Flipping the Economics Script	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ not saving taxpayer dollars ▪ harming the local economy 	Multilingual
Connecting Language to Race	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ racist ▪ xenophobic ▪ depicts white people as unwelcoming 	Raciolinguistic
Questioning the Nature of English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ oversimplified ▪ unenforceable 	Translingual

Figure 1. Three approaches used to advocate against the English-only policy, criticisms they elicited, and underlying language orientations.

Flipping The Economics Script

Economic arguments had propelled Frederick County's English-only policy to success, and much of the repeal campaign focused on flipping that economics script. Flipping the script entails taking a relatively established kind of discourse, reproducing some of the formal features, but doing so with a different goal (Carr 3). In this case, the established discourse involved linking language to the economy. One of the original policy's stated aims was to "reduce costs and promote efficiency." Supporters of the original ordinance had argued that a monolingual government would be best for the local economy, saving money on translation and interpreter services. For example, at a public meeting in 2012, one county commissioner had explained his English-only position this way: "This is truly a business decision. [...] This is about dollars and protecting taxpayer dollars. When it costs \$170 to translate an 8½" x 11" memo, we have to be sure that we're doing the right thing with taxpayer dollars." This was a popular sentiment in the community, and it echoes Scott Wible's findings regarding the "common argument that public and private organizations—and by extension, taxpayers—incur significant financial costs" when they allow for multilingualism ("Rhetoric" 187). Many people who were critical of the English-only policy nevertheless took this economic angle seriously. These politicians and activists argued that money does matter but that multilingualism would be more lucrative than monolingualism.

The repeal bill itself exemplified this strategy. When County Council member Jessica Fitzwater introduced co-sponsored Bill No. 15-08 at a June 2015 public meeting, she read the first section aloud to the audience. According to the opening lines, the purpose of the bill was to

Repeal Ordinance No. 12-03-598 [the English-only policy], for the purpose of promoting a competitive business climate for Frederick County's existing 6,200 businesses which employ 79,000 workers; attracting new life science businesses and jobs that will move Frederick County closer to becoming the State's bio-tech hub; ensuring that non-English language speakers are not deterred from reporting crimes, seeking medical care or other human

services; and generally relating to Frederick County's encouragement of multi-linguistic acceptance, tolerance and multi-cultural diversity in an increasingly global economy.

There are several themes present, from crime to healthcare to multiculturalism. The overarching strategy, however, is to frame the English-only policy as antithetical to a "competitive business climate." Specifically, the bill argues that repealing the English-only policy matters to the county's thousands of businesses and tens of thousands of employees and hinders the county's ability to become "the State's bio-tech hub." Even the concepts of "acceptance," "tolerance," and "diversity" only appear in the immediate context of "an increasingly global economy." Importantly, the preamble does not focus on all economic activities equally: it is primarily about science, technology, engineering, and medicine. In other words, lower-paying jobs and other kinds of industries are not the priority. Finally, the focus on the "increasingly global" has a significant temporal and spatial component and frames multilingualism as a new incoming factor, in contrast to monolingualism, which comes to seem more traditional and more provincial by comparison. This dichotomy, with English-only tradition on one end and emerging multilingualism on the other, elides histories of local multilingualism, heritage languages, and indigenous languages. This bill is actually quite similar to English-only policies: the strategy of linking the fate of the economy to new multilingualism permeates both.

At the same time, this policy also has a twist: its authors used the possibility of multilingual people moving in to argue *against* an English-only policy, rather than for it. They flipped the script. I asked Jessica Fitzwater how she and her colleagues decided to take this approach:

Flowers: How did you all decide to, like, sort of foreground, like, the business community and different industries that

Fitzwater: So, we really felt that for some of our more, um, conservative colleagues, whereas for me, like, this is the right thing to do, and that's enough of an argument for me, um, making the economic argument was, we thought was really important, and it is a

Flowers: Valid

Fitzwater: It's a powerful, valid argument, so.

In this exchange, she answers carefully, by explaining that although "for me, like, this is the right thing to do, and that's enough," economic arguments offered a more "powerful" rationale for the repeal for her "conservative colleagues." She also echoed my interjection that the economic argument was "valid"; she could marshal substantial quantitative and qualitative evidence to support this argument. In other words, flipping the economics script was the rare, possibly the only, strategy that she, her supporters, and her skeptics could all find persuasive. They used the same kinds of economic terms and sources, but with a more multilingual orientation towards language, in order to advance their goal of repealing the English-only policy.

Among Frederick residents, there was real fear of multinational corporations skipping over Frederick for being too provincial and instead planting their offices in some other part of the state or country. Again and again, I encountered descriptions of entrepreneurs being nervous to come to Frederick, out of fear that their diverse employees would either quit, be miserable, or never take a job there in the first place. Some of these narratives focused on interactions beyond the county's

borders. For example, Jessica Fitzwater told me that when the county's "economic development staff" traveled to "trade shows," many recruitment attempts would be met with a skeptical question: "Aren't you guys the ones that just did this English-only [policy]?" The ordinance was not a selling point. People wanted new businesses to stay and thrive, but they worried that the English-only policy was a repellent to more cosmopolitan corporations and employees.

One way participants yoked economic success to multilingualism was to unyoke it from monolingualism. Fitzwater, the bill's co-sponsor M.C. Keegan-Ayer, and others all did so by critiquing the original promise of the English-only policy to reduce government costs. Crucially, they also cited county budget data and a fiscal report to support the idea. The county's finance director prepared a fiscal report that asserted that repealing the English-only policy would result in "No fiscal impact." In other words, whether the policy were in place or not, it would not make any difference to the government's bottom line. Once this report came out in July, council members brought it up during council meetings, media interviews, and to me. In addition to that government-produced report, they also provided quotes on the county budget in an interview with the local newspaper (Loos). These literacy practices of sponsoring, citing, and interpreting this fiscal report are examples of flipping the economics script. At no point did these writers suggest that money does not matter, or that language rights are priceless, or anything along those lines. Instead, granting that money does matter to nearly everyone, they concluded that the most effective way to criticize the English-only policy's economic discourse about multilingualism would be to offer their own.

Making the connection between economic development and accepting multilingualism became central to the repeal campaign. For example, in the midst of a longer explanation of why they thought the repeal happened, one of the writers for the tongue-in-cheek blog Frederick Local Yokel explained

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that while the English-only policy was "specifically targeted at Hispanics," one of the consequences of the policy was that "biomedical firms" which employ "a lot of Asian workers," would also be alienated. The misunderstanding they describe here is painful to contemplate: that "biomedical firms" might not care about the English-only policy if only they understood that it was *really* targeted at "Hispanics," and not their own "Asians." Furthermore, this story only makes sense if one recognizes a dichotomy between Latinx people, on one hand, and people who contribute to the economy, on the other. This dichotomy is flawed, of course. Perhaps for that reason, as they fleshed out this awkward narrative, they also distanced themselves from all the parties involved by adding that for them, "it's not justifiable on any level." After all, this account flatters no one: the English-only policy is racist, and business owners only care if it might affect their own employees.

The Frederick Local Yokel blogger's caveat echoes Fitzwater's aside at the beginning of this section, where she stressed that "whereas for me, this is the right thing to do." Both are conveying that they understand English-only discourse but do not endorse it. I interpret such statements as acknowledgments of the difficulty of flipping the script. On one hand, they knew the economic arguments were important and evidence-based: the English-only policy *did not* result in obvious government savings, there *are* large companies who consider moving to Frederick because of its proximity to military bases and bigger cities, those companies *do* tend to employ a more transnational and multilingual workforce than currently exists in Frederick, some of these potential transplants *were* openly expressing fear of the English-only policy, and repelling potential STEM workers *could* threaten the area's fragile economic success. And yet, for all the promise of economic arguments, the repeal's supporters knew that there were other facets of the policy that mattered, too.

Jessica Fitzwater encapsulated up some of these other facets as the more "emotional side of it." When I asked if there were ever any disagreements over how to frame the repeal bill, she responded by saying that while they did not disagree, *per se*, she did have "discussions" with activists and non-profits about how much to emphasize the emotions surrounding the English-only policy. She explained that while organizations like Casa de Maryland and the Frederick Immigration Coalition had held protests in the streets in the past, her view at the time was, "let's not. We're not going to have a rally beforehand, we're not going to have, like, signs." She added that "we didn't want it to [...] feed into the potential kind of, like, emotional side of it, even though, obviously emotions came out at the hearing, because it is emotional for people on both sides, but we didn't want to add fuel to that fire." This statement suggests that on one hand, there are reasonable, linguistically tolerant people just looking out for the economy, and on the other, there are immigrants and people of color who are too emotional. While the repeal bill did successfully pass, this moment shows one of the downsides of trying to isolate multilingualism and the economy from the broader language policy situation. It is unfortunately tempting for policymakers to pit rights and resources, race and the economy, affect and logic against each other. I turn now to those conditions that made some people so eager to protest in the streets with signs in the first place.

Connecting Language To Race

The English-only policy's racism played a significant role in animating the repeal campaign. From many people's perspectives, the original policy exacerbated ongoing racism against black, Latinx, and Asian American people in the area; and it made white residents look like unwelcoming Frednecks (a well-established local portmanteau for Frederick rednecks). Participants drew attention to all these connections and tried to offer alternatives. A community activist named Jay Mason emphasized the policy's particular resonance with anti-black racism. When he first contacted me about the study, Mason explained that the term "English-only" reminded him of what his and other black families faced during the Jim Crow era.

In preparation for our upcoming interview, I watched streaming footage of Mason speaking at the public hearing about the repeal bill, where he described this analogy to Jim Crow in depth. In

his statement, he explained what his parents used to experience in Frederick, before connecting that history to the present situation:

They had to walk around and see a lot of signs that said “whites only” ((makes sign-sized rectangular gesture))². That word “only” speaks unacceptance. “English only” speaks unacceptance.

As he spoke the phrase “whites only,” Mason raised his hands to shoulder level and moved them in unison in a rectangle, as if to trace one of the signs that characterized so many businesses and institutions before and during the 1960s civil rights movement (Figure 2). He then tied that phrase to the second phrase, “English only,” not just by listing both, but by emphasizing the word in common—“only.” Later, during our interview, he said that during the public hearing, he had “felt like we were back in 1950 all over again.” In response, I asked him why he thought people felt more comfortable speaking about language-based exclusion than about “explicitly” racist exclusion. He laughed, sighed, and paused in quick succession, which made me realize that, as a white person, I had already assumed too much in the way I asked the question. I tried again: “Although maybe there was some explicitly racist stuff?” This time, he did reply, by saying, “I felt like they were explicit.” Mason was not alone in connecting language policy to racism.



Figure 2. Jay Mason gestures in the shape of street sign while comparing Jim Crow-era “Whites Only” signs to English-only policies. He is facing the County Council, with audience members in the background.

While Jim Crow policies like the ones Mason describes were common around the US, their legacy in this area is particularly potent in conjunction with local histories of slavery and, into the present, Ku Klux Klan activity. While the Klan peaked in 1920s in some parts of the country, Maryland and

a few other states saw a resurgence in the late 1970s (Sims 267). In the 1990s, the Klan was so well-established in the town of Thurmont, in northern Frederick County, that a resident could identify a business “known as the local Klan bar,” where one could find members “there every Saturday night and most others” in two specially reserved booths (Davis 33). Several of my participants either remembered Klan activity first hand or through their parents’ experiences. These phenomena are not just rooted in history but are continuing to unfold. During my first week in the county in 2015, I heard about and attended a protest against the KKK in the town of Braddock Heights. Shortly after, someone poured a can of red paint over a bust of Justice Roger Taney to call attention to the statue’s continued, controversial display in downtown Frederick. Taney was a one-time resident who later wrote the 1857 pro-slavery opinion in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. The city (not county) government had vacillated over what to do with the bust for years, but it was not removed until March 2017. These ongoing struggles against racism made Mason’s public hearing statement all the more resonant.

At the same time as these anti-black-racism-related issues continued to play out, the past decade had also been a time of heightened local xenophobia and immigrant rights activism, particularly in the context of Latinx and Asian immigrants. Maryland had narrowly passed its version of the DREAM Act in 2012, county law enforcement had partnered with federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement through the 287(g) program, and former County Commissioner Blaine Young had explicitly expressed a desire to make Frederick “the most unfriendly county in the state of Maryland to illegal aliens” (Anderson). A writer for the organization Occupy Frederick (a riff on Occupy Wall Street) found Young’s policies to be particularly galling. Throughout summer 2015, they wrote several posts on the Occupy Frederick Facebook page about their own views on the issue, linked to posts by Jessica Fitzwater (July 9), summarized what happened at County Council meetings (August 18), and drafted a “sample email” message that people could send to the government in support of the repeal (July 21).

When I asked the Occupy Frederick writer why they decided to tackle this issue, they identified the English-only policy as part of the local Tea Party agenda and then continued:

The county has always had a problem with race, OK. Blaine Young’s an opportunist. He’s also a racist. But he sees an enormous political opportunity for himself here. So he immediately moves into this English-only stuff, which, you’ve read is meaningless on the surface³, but it’s like a little check box. “Blaine Young opposes illegal immigrants,” which means, in, in Republican code, “He’s a racist,” OK?

In this interview excerpt, they connect Young (who led the original English-only campaign) to racism, to opportunism, to opposition to undocumented immigrants, all in one utterance. They also suggest that the policy was a “check box” for Young to prove his Republican ethos. In his framework, all these concepts are nearly synonymous, and they all point to each other.

While Mason and the Occupy Frederick writer were acting relatively independently from the local government, connecting language to race was also an important strategy within the county’s Human Relations Commission (HRC). Like many similar commissions around the US, this Human Relations Commission (HRC) emerged out of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, first as the “Inter-Racial Committee,” and then later in its current form. In February 2015, Jessica Fitzwater asked the

commission to “create a package to present to the council in the future” about repealing the English-only policy (“Minutes”; Spencer). The resulting two-page resolution touches on race, rights, language, the economy, and history. The authors contend that the English-only policy is inconsistent with their mission “to monitor and recommend civil rights policy,” and with the “belie[f] that one of the most vital and valuable aspects of daily life in Frederick County is its diversity and cultural heritage where all races, religions, ages, and cultures are welcome, as should be all languages.” The history of European immigrants also gets a mention, in a clause recognizing the county’s “long history of multiple languages over the last three centuries, including our rich German heritage.” Finally, the text includes a description of the local economy that is both more accurate and more elegant than most: “governments, businesses, and individuals in Frederick County communicate freely and openly, most often in English but in many other languages as well.” In contrast to Fitzwater’s concerns over allowing any of the “emotional side of it” into the conversation, this document openly brings together multilingual and raciolinguistic arguments. Audiences seemed to appreciate the resolution, both out in public, by reposting it on several social media pages, and within the County Council, by copying select passages directly into the repeal bill (I discuss the details of the copying below). And yet, while some parts of the resolution did reappear in the bill, the parts about racism and civil rights did not.

Instead of naming racism and xenophobia explicitly, some of the people involved, particularly white people, preferred to focus on how the English-only policy harmed white people’s reputation. Specifically, I repeatedly encountered white people expressing how they did not want to be seen as unwelcoming rednecks. For example, a July 21 Frederick Local Yokel blog post briefly mentioned that the policy “makes us look like uneducated, backwoods . . . rednecks,” and in our interview, one of the writers added, “this looks unwelcoming.” At a public hearing, one man (who I did not interview), expressed concern that outside corporations would not want to come there if it meant dealing with “Frednecks.”

This kind of concern over how English-only policies might make white people look is why I consider the orientation underlying this approach to be “raciolinguistic,” rather than more narrowly “anti-racist.” A raciolinguistic perspective is broadly about examining connections people make between language and race (Rosa and Flores 622). Everyone in this section is calling attention to connections between language and race, but that could mean anything from criticizing racism to trying to recuperate white identity. There is a serious limitation to this discourse about unwelcoming Frednecks vs. welcoming white people: people

“Anxieties over white identity (rather than racism and racial justice) thus threatened to oversaturate the discussions about this language policy’s connection to race. While Frederick County did successfully repeal their English-only policy, more widespread policy change may be difficult until discussions of language are driven more by people of color, transnational migrants, and multilingual people, and less by monolingual white Americans worried about whether they appear unwelcoming.”

of color only appear as people to invite in or keep out, rather than as people with agency. The centuries-long presence of indigenous people, black people, and European immigrants does not easily fit into this framework. Anxieties over white identity (rather than racism and racial justice) thus threatened to oversaturate the discussions about this language policy's connection to race. While Frederick County did successfully repeal their English-only policy, more widespread policy change may be difficult until discussions of language are driven more by people of color, transnational migrants, and multilingual people, and less by monolingual white Americans worried about whether they appear unwelcoming. I now turn to the strategy focused not on the economy, or on race, but on language itself.

Questioning The Nature Of English

In addition to advocating for multilingualism and against racism, participants used a third strategy: questioning the nature of English itself. Unlike the economic discourse about multilingualism, which argued for the value of multiple different languages (each associated with different nations around the world), this move was more about articulating the problems with taking such boundaries for granted. The difference is between a multilingual orientation towards communication in multiple languages and a translingual orientation towards the ways that “communication transcends individual languages” (Canagarajah 6). In this section, I discuss how one participant employed this strategy at a public meeting to local acclaim.

A county council member named Jerry Donald exemplified the translingual strategy by deciding to use his speaking time at the final public meeting to interrogate the English-only policy's underpinnings. In doing so, he was taking advantage of the fact that people in the English-only movement generally “fail to define English” (Horner et al. 309). He began by asking the county attorney (who had helped draft the original English-only ordinance) a number of questions about how the policy was defining the English language. In other words, while other people had focused on the “Only” half of the English-only law, he was asking about the “English” part. At one point, he asked, “How are we defining this? Oxford Dictionary? Webster's Dictionary?” Donald went on to add that the ordinance did not even specify any one dialect of English, like “American English.” The county attorney tepidly responded that they have used a 2007 edition of Webster's Dictionary to clarify definitions in the past. Donald wondered aloud how the government was supposed to handle words that had come into use after 2007. After some more exchanges back and forth, the attorney grumbled that he did not “appreciate” being singled out for questioning. He may have been frustrated because Donald was asking questions that they both already knew the answers to: the government did not have a perfect definition of what English was, because there is no perfect definition. Donald eased up on questioning the county attorney, but he continued to lay out his issues with the ordinance.

Donald made the case that English is not really controllable by anyone or anything and that therefore an English-only policy is untenable on practical grounds. He described how English is “a complete free market,” where “things come and go and move on” beyond our control. “English moves,” he argued, and trying to legislate language is like “trying to nail currant jelly to a wall.” Using

the example of the word “burrito,” he suggested that it is not clear what is and is not English. Later, in our interview, he made it clear that he was not just describing a contemporary phenomenon of globalization; he cited the way Middle English grew out of Old English and French, and the long history of language contact in the United States between English, Yiddish, Spanish, and other languages. When I asked how he developed this perspective, he mentioned his general knowledge of US and world history, as well as Bill Bryson’s book *Made in America: An Informal History of the English Language in the United States*, which devotes space to language contact among indigenous people, enslaved black people, and early settlers. His description of English’s impurity rang true to other participants, and reflects several increasingly accepted theories about the impossibility of drawing clear borders around the English language (Nero 137; Mufwene 107; Pennycook, *Language* 68; Canagarajah 57), and the promise of a “border-crossing model” in writing studies (You 201). Donald’s strategy also echoed ones used to question the purity of languages other than English or outside the US, like “de-essentializing” indigenous languages (Lyons xii) and “defanging” English in Canada (Heller 183). In other words, Donald made a persuasive argument not by eliding the linguistic complexity of the issue but by articulating it in all its messiness.

Other people in the community welcomed Donald’s discourse, whether they were in the room that night or watching the live stream. The bloggers I interviewed singled out his performance as particularly persuasive. The Occupy Frederick writer told me that the way Donald “broke this thing down” was “beautiful” and “the most compelling argument against this English-only law that I have ever heard.” This compliment is an example of how open some people were to different strategies: the Occupy Frederick writer focused mostly on economics, race, and immigration in their own discourse but went out of their way to bring up and endorse Donald’s angle, too. The bloggers for Frederick Local Yokel also singled out Jerry Donald’s performance. In a post from the night of the repeal vote (August 18), they attributed his rhetorical abilities in part to his background in education. They wrote, “Props to Jerry Donald for pointing out that the English-Only ordinance was a loser from the right hand side, in that it created unnecessary and meaningless legislation to govern a free-market and constantly evolving language environment. Leave it to a teacher to go all debate team on it and show us he can rock it from the other angle.” Aside from the praise, what is notable about this blog post is how it repeats Donald’s own use of the term “free market” in his public statement. This finding resonates with other recent work on how policymakers, scholars, and teachers can associate both multilingualism and linguistic fluidity with a capitalist framework, in settings ranging from European Union language policy (Flores) to the field of TESOL (Kubota). The translingual approach may have appealed so strongly to people precisely because it synthesized a more familiar understanding of language as a resource with an incisive new set of questions about how language is defined and quantified in the first place.

Narrowing Possibilities for Language Advocacy

While the previous sections have showed the wealth of literacy practices people used to change an English-only policy, I now turn to how the campaign’s most official discourse started to home in

on flipping the economics script, potentially at the expense of other possibilities. This narrowing process began with a community-wide petition, which had been one of the first topics people discussed at early planning meetings (Fitzwater; Spencer). In Spring 2015, Angela Spencer told me members of the Human Relations Commission started collecting signatures in support of repealing the English-only ordinance, both on their own and by sharing the petition with “civic groups, faith-based groups, community and neighborhood” groups. According to minutes from the April 28, 2015 HRC meeting, “everyone was asked to fill at least a page and bring them to the next meeting.” This was a collective effort to show community support. Later, at the final public hearing before the vote, a community activist came up to the podium and held up the petition so that the council and the audience could all see it. She said the petition had 1,000 signatures, and as she lifted it up, she asked anyone in the room who had signed to stand up. In her statement, she also talked about the English-only ordinance’s potential to harm local businesses and dissuade new businesses from moving to town, and its lack of potential to save the county money. She emphasized the collective action behind this position, as manifested by the thick stack of paper and at least three people coming to their feet. Over time and across different situations, then, the petition helped build grassroots support, demonstrate that support, and, finally, highlight the strategy of flipping the economics script.

Like the petition, the repeal bill was the result of collaborative writing but also of narrowing the focus of the campaign. When I asked the bill’s two sponsors who wrote the bill, they both listed many people and sources. A “county attorney” (Keegan-Ayer) and “some county staff” helped write the bill, both by expanding on “bullet points” that Fitzwater provided and by doing additional “research” on what the “typical arguments” against English-only policies might be (Fitzwater). Jessica Fitzwater’s position as government liaison to the Human Relations Commission was key. Early on, Fitzwater had suggested that the HRC propose something about the possibility of a repeal to the council. At that time, the HRC and she had sustained “conversation about the document [and] what exactly our statement would be,” and then the text was “compiled together” (Spencer). As I discuss in the section on race, this resolution made a holistic argument against the English-only policy by deftly weaving together ideas about the economy, race, diversity, culture, tolerance, and general quality of life in the community. Afterwards, Fitzwater, Keegan-Ayer, and county staff used this resolution as source material for the final draft of the bill. In other words, Fitzwater created a sort of policy loop by encouraging them to write the resolution, then incorporating some of it back into her bill.

As content moved through this loop, though, its meaning did become more cramped. For example, both documents include a statement about how the “[o]rdinance, and the perception it has created, [is/constitutes] a barrier to...” However, the sentences end quite differently:

- HRC Resolution: “this Ordinance, and the perception it has created, is a barrier to making Frederick County the very best place to live, work, and raise a family.”
- Repeal Bill: “the Ordinance, and the perception it has created, constitutes a barrier to good business and impedes the growth and development of business and commercial endeavors in Frederick County.”

In the Resolution, the barrier is at once social, cultural, and economic. The meaning of “barrier” is much more specific in the bill, however. There, the sentence ends with “a barrier to good business and

impedes the growth and development of business and commercial endeavors in Frederick County.” In this version of the clause, the focus is purely on the economy. The point is that while the bill is transparently intertextual and coauthored, it is *not* just a more concise, or more polished version of the HRC resolution, or any of the other discourse from the campaign. Rather, flipping the economics script clearly became the most enshrined strategy in the bill. The robust local discourse about race appears only obliquely, in words like “tolerance,” “diversity,” and “multi-linguistic acceptance,” and there is no mention whatsoever of questioning the nature of English. As a policy becomes more streamlined, it may also become more limited. At the same time, an official policy’s narrow focus does not, and indeed cannot, erase the more expansive vision of a long-term, community-wide campaign.

Conclusion

In Frederick County’s repeal campaign, politicians and activists countered their local English-only policy’s monolingual orientation by adopting multilingual, raciolinguistic, and translanguaging orientations to language. They enacted these alternate orientations in three ways: flipping the economics script, linking language to race, and questioning the nature of English. People like Jessica Fitzwater and M.C. Keegan-Ayer flipped the economics script, by arguing that the English-only policy was actually hurting, rather than helping, the local economy. Others, like Jay Mason and the writer for Occupy Frederick’s Facebook page, argued against the original ordinance on the grounds that it is racist. Jerry Donald and the bloggers for Frederick Local Yokel took a more translanguaging approach, by questioning the very premise of English-only policies, which rests on assumptions about English being completely unitary and separate from other languages. At the same time, flipping the economics script risked overshadowing the other strategies. The bill’s co-sponsors seemed to perceive the economic strategy as the most likely to win over skeptics, and in a predominately white, middle-class community, this was a shrewd move to make. Because discourse about race and the nature of language appeared more on the margins of the campaign (on anonymous blogs, in audience comments at public hearings, and from a politician who was not an official sponsor), the notion that language policy is merely about how to maximize economic and communicative efficiency remained largely intact.

This study has implications for broader conversation in writing studies and related fields about how orientations towards language develop and change. I address several of these implications: the affordances of each of the three approaches, the added potential value of combining multiple approaches, and the benefits of centering policymakers’ perspectives in future research. Each of these findings opens up space for future inquiry in language and literacy research, as well as future language advocacy in teaching, administration, and publishing. In terms of the individual approaches, engaging with economic arguments, showing how language and race shape each other, and questioning the ontological status of “English” are all applicable to a range of language policy situations. For example, the willingness to take economic concerns seriously echoes Tom McNamara’s findings about Chinese international students on a university campus, and his argument that compositionists “must rethink advocacy work that has traditionally relied on a language of rights”

(32), and turn their attention instead to “exploit[ing] the revenue-oriented values of the corporate university” (21–22). In this study, I have examined how this dynamic plays out in public policy, and I have shown what this sort of engagement with “revenue-oriented values” can look like in practice, including both its power and its potential to draw attention away from other possibilities. Future research might explore how this approach to language advocacy plays out in writing program administration. In terms of the more raciolinguistic and translanguingual approaches, I have highlighted the ability of these kinds of arguments to move people to action. As part of the language policymaking process, and in activities like faculty development and assessment, it is important to be explicit about the racist histories and logics that make English-only policies seem normal and desirable, and to pose questions about who benefits and who is marginalized by such policies. Similarly, it is crucial to keep in mind the theoretical problems with monolingual language policies: they purport to isolate and elevate one code above all others, despite the fact that communication is always more fluid in practice.

In addition to their individual strengths, there is an added advantage to meshing all these alternatives to monolingualism. I would argue that a meshed approach is ultimately more effective than trying to purify and deploy any one in isolation. Communication is translanguingual, multilingualism has economic consequences, and language cannot be separated from race in the United States.

“[A] meshed approach is ultimately more effective than trying to purify and deploy any one in isolation. Communication is translanguingual, multilingualism has economic consequences, and language cannot be separated from race in the United States.”

Meshing different approaches does not necessarily have to be an individual undertaking, or something that happens in one communicative event. In other words, there is no need for the language policy text itself to cover all possible bases, there is no need for one person to stand up and weave together all these

approaches in one definitive speech, editorial, or mission statement, and there is no need for a group of like-minded people to present a united front. In Frederick, people unevenly distributed their discourse strategies across genres, audiences, and situations, which may actually be more likely to lead to policy change than any steady drumbeat of talking points, even if that change is always partial.

A final insight is that plenty of people have already moved away from a monolingual orientation to language, if they ever were there in the first place. My participants did not so much choose to work on language policy as they were thrust into language policy work by the fact that they all lived in a community with an English-only ordinance. Nevertheless, they were able to navigate the policymaking process. In light of my participants’ savviness, we would be wise to regard public policymakers and activists as potential resources, rather than merely people in need of scholars’ expertise. To be sure, writing studies has made significant contributions to US language policy, particularly through the organizational efforts of CCCC. I agree, too, with Scott Wible’s argument that “[l]anguage policies position compositionists as public intellectuals who can provide leadership

in public debates on linguistic diversity” (*Shaping* 173). However, the methodology I developed for this study, particularly the ethnographic component, opens up the exact opposite possibility as well. Tracing, listening to, and centering how people engage with language policies in their own communities, from their own perspectives, towards their own ends, can provide writing studies with novel models of what it means to resist and rewrite English-only policies.⁴

NOTES

¹In 2014, Frederick County shifted forms of government, from a County Commissioner structure to one with a County Council plus a County Executive. The terminology used to describe county-level politicians thus varies over the course of the article.

²Transcription convention: double parentheses are used to mark non-verbal activity.

³The phrase “meaningless on its surface” refers to the fact that the 2012 English-only ordinance included a number of exception clauses. For example, the ordinance would not apply in situations of “public health, sanitation, and public safety.”

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