

Language in the New Nation—Jefferson and Rush

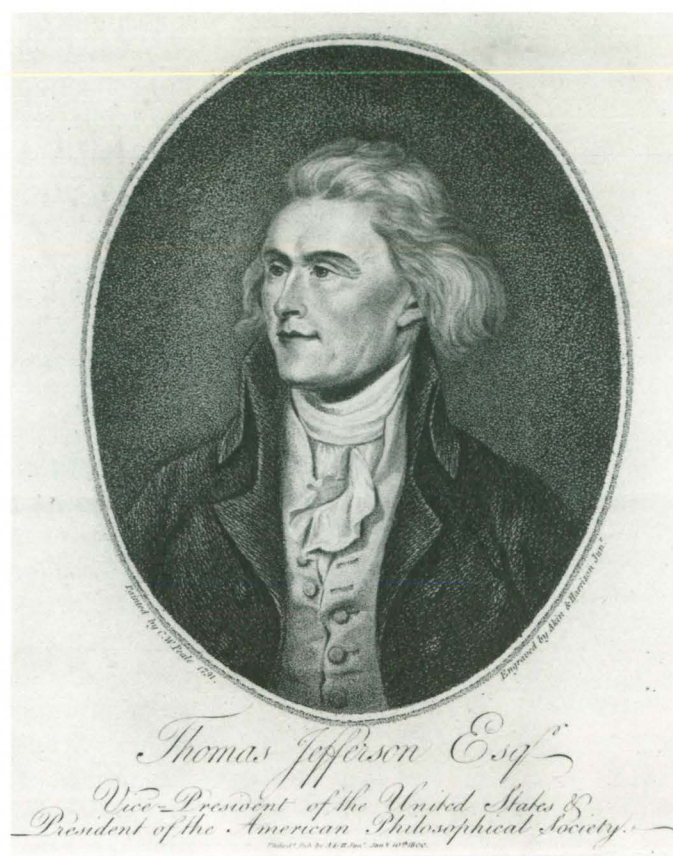
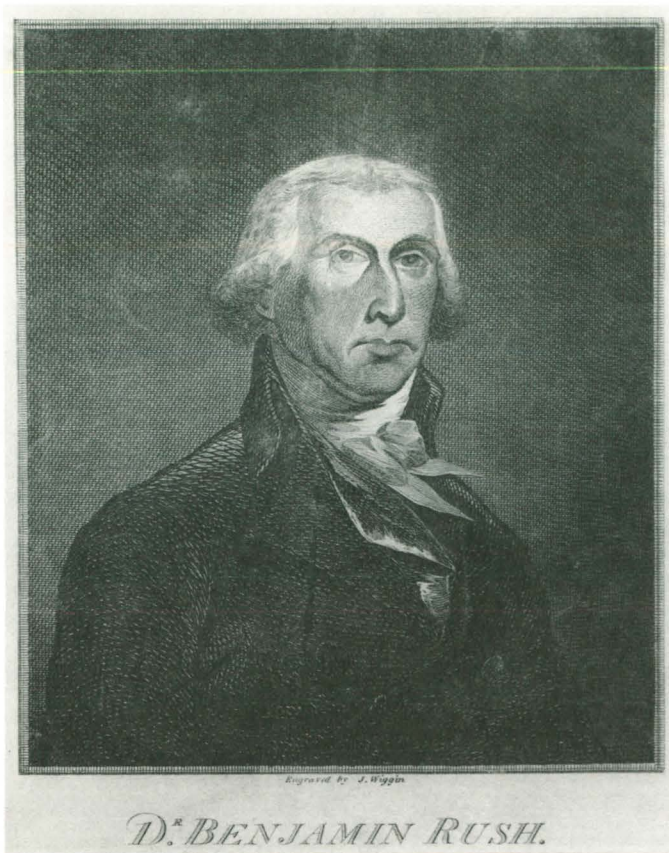
by Frank Proschan

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Today's Americans, celebrating the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution, look back, as their predecessors have, to the wisdom of the early patriots for guidance concerning present-day social problems and issues. In 1987, as in 1787, America's linguistic diversity and cultural variety are seen by some as threats to national unity and by others as a primary resource for national strength. As the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia to solidify the new republic, one of every ten Americans spoke another language than English as their mother tongue. The largest minority language at the time was German, but sizable numbers of residents of the thirteen newly liberated states spoke French, Dutch, Spanish, and uncounted Native American and African languages. Contemporary debates on language issues were not uncommon, but they usually centered on whether American English should be distinguished from the English of the British Isles and rarely considered whether languages other than English should be encouraged, tolerated, or suppressed.

The Constitution itself is silent on the matter of a national language. The Continental Congress published the Articles of Confederation in English and German, and ordered other public documents printed in English, German, and French. After this first burst of official multilingualism, however, English soon became the dominant language of government. Indeed, the status of language in the emerging nation was not even discussed by the delegates to the Constitutional Convention. Yet the model of government that evolved during the deliberations of the Convention was one firmly grounded in a philosophy of pluralism: diversity of opinions and experiences was amply protected through the mechanisms balancing the interests of the states and the nation, and of the three branches of government. Religious and cultural pluralism, addressed only in passing in the Constitution itself, was nevertheless debated during the Convention and was included prominently in the first amendments, the Bill of Rights.

In the face of this historical silence on the issue of language in the new nation, we can look to the writings of two people for evidence that linguistic diversity was enthusiastically embraced by at least some of the founding generation: the Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush and the Virginia statesman Thomas Jefferson. Neither took part in the proceedings of the Constitutional Convention, although Rush followed events closely through frequent conversations with delegates, and Jefferson monitored developments from his diplomatic post in Paris. Their opinions, however, were part of the intellectual currency of the day, debated over



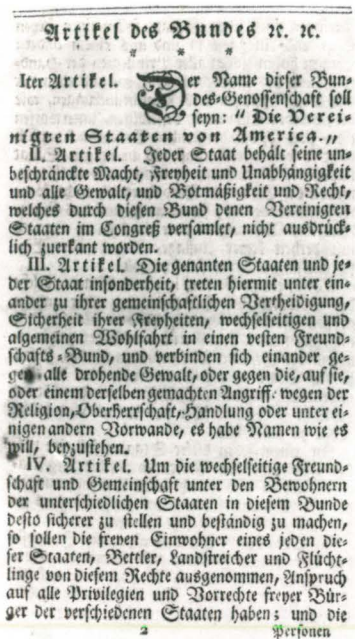
dinner tables, in correspondence, and in newspapers. Those opinions have striking resonances with modern dialogues on related topics.

Benjamin Rush, a native speaker of both English and German, was a physician, inventor, and educator. An adherent of direct and straightforward speech, he abhorred Greek and Latin as the refuge of pedants who would disguise their ignorance in the cloak of antiquity. In 1789 he wrote about his “attempt to bring the dead languages into disrepute” in a letter to Vice-President John Adams, asking, “Do not men use Latin and Greek as the scuttlefish emit their ink, on purpose to conceal themselves from an intercourse with the common people?” He advocated education that would prepare people to be useful citizens and effective members of government, and he insisted that plain speech was preferable to learned twaddle. Rush anticipated the tenet of linguistic relativity, suggesting that all languages are potentially equal in their rational power and intellectual capacities. Even an Indian language was as suitable to the development of reason and of responsible citizens as Greek or Latin, Rush noted. “A man who is learned in the dialect of a Mohawk Indian,” he wrote in 1785, “is more fit for a legislator than a man who is ignorant even in the language of the learned Greeks.”

Rush was also a pioneer advocate of bilingual education, proposing the establishment of a German college in a 1785 letter “To the Citizens of Pennsylvania of German Birth and Extraction.” He claimed that “German youth will more readily acquire knowledge in the [German] language . . . [and will] be more easily instructed in the principles of their own religion in their own language.” More

Benjamin Rush, by James Akin, 1800. Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

Thomas Jefferson, by James Akin, 1800. Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.



The German edition of the Articles of Confederation, 1774. Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

important, he asserted, was that “by teaching and learning in their own language, they will sooner acquire a perfect knowledge of the English language.” A college teaching students in the German language “will open the eyes of the Germans to a sense of the importance and utility of the English language and become perhaps the only possible means, consistent with their liberty, of spreading a knowledge of the English language among them.” The larger goal, for Rush, was to eradicate “ignorance and prejudice . . . that keeps men of different countries and religions apart” in order to allow “Germans to unite more intimately with their British and Irish fellow citizens and thus to form with them one homogeneous mass of people.”

Rush’s proposal was taken up by his readers, and in June, 1787, as the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia, Rush traveled to Lancaster for the consecration of Franklin College. In his remarks to the trustees of the new college, Rush emphasized that the desire of his fellow Germans “to establish their language in Pennsylvania” was balanced by a realization that “they must prepare to be called to assist in the government of the United States. The English language will be absolutely necessary to qualify them for usefulness in our great national legislature.” At the same time, he emphasized, the college would play a vital role in promoting the German language: “By means of this College the German language will be preserved from extinction and corruption by being taught in a grammatical manner,” and Pennsylvanians of German descent would serve as ambassadors conveying the cultural, scientific, and literary accomplishments of Germany to the United States.

No American of the time was more accomplished in the cultural, scientific, and literary spheres than Thomas Jefferson. His pioneering work in ethnology and linguistics is little known, however, in comparison with his contributions to philosophy, government, and education. Fluent in French, Spanish, and Italian, and literate in Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon, Jefferson was particularly concerned with the evolution of English in the new nation. He welcomed new coinages, offering as an example the very word “neologism”; it was, he claimed, “a good word, well sounding and obvious, and expresses an idea which would otherwise require circumlocution.” Through “judicious neology” the language of America would be improved, even at the risk of diverging from that of England. In 1813 he wrote:

Certainly so great growing a population, spread over such an extent of country, with such a variety of climates, of productions, of arts, must enlarge their language, to make it answer its purpose of expressing all ideas, the new as well as the old. The new circumstances under which we are placed, call for new words, new phrases, and for the transfer of old words to new objects. An American dialect will therefore be formed . . .

Jefferson viewed the process of neologization and the existence of dialectal diversity within the English language in a strikingly modern way, an approach that distanced him from the efforts of some to establish an “American Academy of Language and Belles Lettres” that would develop a single standard American language

and preserve it from corruption and debasement. Jefferson was skeptical of the effectiveness of such language planning or of similar efforts to simplify American spelling. Even dictionaries had little persuasive force, nor should they. Jefferson wrote that "dictionaries are but the depositories of words already legitimated by usage. Society is the workshop in which new ones are elaborated. When an individual uses a new word, if ill formed, it is rejected in society; if well formed, adopted, and after due time, laid up in the depository of dictionaries." Jefferson's democratic faith in the people extended to language: it was society itself, and not some self-appointed arbiters, who would determine the shape that American English took.

Jefferson's democratic vision extended as well to those who spoke other languages than English. As a founder of the University of Virginia, he advocated instruction in the modern languages: French as "the language of general intercourse among nations," Spanish as the language of "so great a portion of the inhabitants of our continents, with whom we shall probably have great intercourse ere long . . .," as well as German and Italian. And throughout his life he pursued his own fascination with the languages and cultures of the Native Americans, collecting "about 30 vocabularies, formed of the same English words, expressive of . . . simple objects . . ." so as to "arrange them into families and dialects." Indeed, even as the Framers convened in Philadelphia, the first American edition of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* was published, with its discussions of Indian archeology, customs, and languages.

In the *Notes* Jefferson turned to the question "from whence came those aboriginals of America?" Noting the possibilities of Arctic passage from Europe or Asia, Jefferson suggests that "a knowledge of their several languages would be the most certain evidence of their derivation which could be produced. In fact, it is the best proof of the affinity of nations which ever can be referred to." Such evidence, he insists, must be gathered while it can: "It is to be lamented then, very much to be lamented, that we have suffered so many of the Indian tribes already to extinguish, without our having previously collected and deposited in the records of literature, the general rudiments at least of the languages they spoke." Jefferson's regret was not simply for the loss of abstract scientific knowledge—he had a genuine concern for the Indians as fellow humans, extending from his early childhood to his death.

Jefferson was a statesman as well as a scholar, and he pioneered government involvement in the scientific study of language and culture. While fulfilling his duties as Vice-President and later President of the Republic, he also sat as president of the American Philosophical Society, encouraging its early ethnographic activities and enlisting support "to inquire into the Customs, Manners, Languages and Character of the Indian nations, ancient and modern, and their migrations." In the same era he proposed expeditions to the regions west of the Mississippi, pledging his own funds to underwrite such explorations. Following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Jefferson lost little time in mobilizing the Lewis and Clark expedition, instructing them in ethnographic method and (probably assisted by Benjamin Rush) preparing a detailed questionnaire

to elicit sociological, ethnographic, folkloric, and linguistic information.

Importantly, one of the prominent goals assigned to Lewis and Clark was similar to Rush's stated intention in teaching Germans in their own language: to promote more effective acculturation of the Indian peoples in order that they might be brought more fully into the polity of the growing nation. Jefferson instructed Lewis and Clark that "considering the interest which every nation has in extending and strengthening the authority of reason and justice among the people around them, it will be useful to acquire what knowledge you can of the state of morality, religion and information among them, as it may better enable those who endeavor to civilize and instruct them, to adapt their measures to the existing nations and practices of those on whom they are to operate."

In the two centuries since Rush and Jefferson first considered issues of linguistic diversity in the new republic, Americans have continued to debate about the American English language and about the place of non-English languages in American life. In that time the languages spoken in the United States have been diminished through the disappearance of numerous Native American languages and the death or assimilation of their speakers. The number of American languages has also increased through new immigration — first from Eastern and Southern Europe, the Middle East, China, Japan, and the Philippines. In recent decades speakers of numerous languages from Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific have joined the American chorus. As citizens continue to weigh the complicated issues of language in the United States, we can usefully return to the wisdom of those like Rush and Jefferson who pioneered such discussion.

Suggested reading

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