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## A National Language Academy? Debate in the New Nation

In 1776, when the United States of America declared independence from England, the new nation faced problems similar in many ways to those of today's newly independent and developing nations. These problems included the need to unify diverse internal populations and to promote acceptance of the new nation by the European community. Many individuals wished to model the new government on that of the power which had previously administered the colony; others proposed indigenous political systems devised to fit the needs of the new nation. National leaders believed prominence in science and commerce had to be achieved to bring improvement in material circumstances and to make the nation ready for modernization. A national program of education was needed to eradicate widespread illiteracy. In each of these problem areas, language was and is a societal resource.

For contemporary developing and newly independent nations facing these problems, language planning at the national level by a centralized agency is sometimes suggested. Two hundred years ago, the United States also had proposals for national language academies of various formats and philosophies placed before its national leaders. However, the United States rejected the establishment of any national language academy. The particular circumstances of these proposals and the motivations and arguments of the proponents plus the reasons for their rejection are the substance of this paper.<sup>1</sup>

In rejecting a national language academy, the founding fathers made clear their choice *not* to designate a national tongue; moreover, the state refused to provide official sanction for specific criteria and procedures of linguistic change or standardization. Instead, national political leaders and state and local agencies promoted respect for diversity of languages, and a plethora of methods of defining and standardizing American English was put forward by individuals and local academic establishments and societies. National leaders had an