



REVIEW ESSAY

The Politics of Language and Ethnicity

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Language and Minority Rights: Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Politics of Language

Stephen May

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The Politics of Language: Conflict, Identity and Cultural Pluralism in Comparative Perspective

Carol L. Schmid

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The politics of language and ethnicity has become the focus of an increasing amount of research in recent years, and rightly so (O'Reilly 2001a, 2001b). With an ever-decreasing amount of linguistic diversity as languages die out all over the world, the dominance of a small number of state languages has meant that regional, minority, indigenous and lesser-used languages have had to strive for a place. Struggles for civil and human rights are very often tied to issues of language, as are the ongoing debates over nationalism and national identity that seem to characterise the post-modern western world. Indeed conflict over language has become a part of or a proxy for all kinds of political struggle, from the recent violence in Macedonia, to the nationalist revival of the Irish language in Northern Ireland, to the issue of immigration in the United States. Wherever it is not possible or politically correct to debate openly in terms of 'race' or ethnicity, language is used as a sort of shorthand for cultural and identity politics (O'Reilly 1999).

The politics of language is the subject of two recent publications by Stephen May and Carol L. Schmid. Both are primarily concerned with the rights of minority language speakers, though their regional focus is somewhat different. Schmid's primary focus is the United States with comparative chapters on Canada and Switzerland, while May is primarily concerned with the issue of minority rights in a European context with comparative chapters on North America and Aotearoa/New Zealand. There is much to recommend in both books, which cover different but complementary areas with some geographical and topical overlap. While Schmid takes a rather more statistical and legal-historical approach, May pays greater attention to the wider philosophical justifications for minority language rights. Both come across as sympathetic to the rights of minority language speakers, although May is rather more passionate in tone.

Stephen May has written extensively on multiculturalism and multicultural education (see for example 1994, 1999a, 1999b). *Language and Minority Rights* is an erudite work, pulling together themes and threads of debate from a variety of disciplines that all too often fail to absorb each other's work even though they deal with the same issues. In the introduction he provides context with a discussion of minority language loss and the prospects for the survival of global language diversity. May does not say anything particularly new here, but he presents the basics in the same clear and articulate fashion that characterises the entire book, making it very suitable for use as a textbook in

undergraduate courses. May also introduces the key arguments that he develops in later chapters. Essentially he argues that minority language rights 'are both sociologically and politically defensible in the modern world', and that we need 'to radically rethink, or *reimagine*, the traditional organisation of nation-states' because it is this 'more than anything else, which most threatens the ongoing survival of minority languages' (May 2001: 15-16).

May also argues, perhaps more controversially, that a greater accommodation of minority languages and cultures within the nation-state will require 'an acceptance of the legitimacy of some form of group-based rights in modern liberal democracies' (May 2001: 17). He qualifies this, however, by saying that it must be done in conjunction with a recognition of the rights of minority language speakers as individual citizens. He suggests that the accommodation of minority language rights is not simply a matter of increasing democracy; it is essential if we wish to avoid the potential fragmentation of the nation-state, which we have seen occur with such dreadful consequences over the last few years. A common assumption of opponents of minority rights is that such recognition will lead to increasing fragmentation, disunity, and ultimately conflict – arguments that are rejected both by May and Schmid. Indeed, May argues that 'ethnic and national conflicts are most often precipitated when nation-states *ignore* demands for greater cultural and linguistic democracy' (2001: 17).

In Chapter 1 May discusses 'the denunciation of ethnicity' both in academic and political circles, and the implications of this for ethnic minority groups and the languages they speak. In popular commentary, ethnicity is seen as a cause of conflicts such as those in Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda/Burundi and Sri Lanka. He attributes the pejorative perception of ethnicity held by many to the unfavourable juxtaposition of ethnicity, primitivism and particularism on the one hand, and the nation-state, modernity and universalism on the other. This is followed by a detailed exploration of the polarisation of the debate on ethnicity into 'primordial' and 'situational' approaches. May concludes, and I would concur, that such a dichotomy is ultimately unhelpful. Instead he proposes that ethnicity be viewed as both constructed and contingent, *and* as a significant social, political and cultural form of life (by which he means material ways of being in the modern world). He accomplishes this by adapting Bourdieu's concept of habitus from class to ethnicity and applying it as a way of thinking and asking questions, and using Smith's concept of 'ethnies' for the particularities of how ethnicity is enacted.

May makes a similar argument in Chapter 2, where he examines debates over modernist versus primordialist approaches to nationalism that in many ways closely parallel those on ethnicity. Once again, he suggests that a middle position is the best way forward. While broadly in agreement with a modernist approach to understanding nationalism, May argues that we need to take into account both the legal-political dimensions and the cultural-historical in order to avoid conflating the nation with the state, and consequently failing to acknowledge that the civic culture of the nation-state is in fact that of the dominant ethnic group. This is a problem also highlighted by Schmid in her analysis of language politics in the US, where the 'white Anglo-Saxon Protestant' dominant culture assumes a neutral position as a unifying civic culture while all other cultures are seen as 'ethnic' and therefore divisive.

Chapter 3 is devoted to a discussion of current political theory in relation to the claims of minorities for greater representation within nation-states, in particular the prominent debates on individual versus group-differentiated rights. He combines the theories of Will Kymlicka and Iris Marion Young to 'marry a theory of rights to the complexities of political practice' (May 2001: 125-6). In Chapter 4, May returns to the issue of language



loss and language shift, focusing on the cultural and political aspects of the relationship between language and identity. He uses two case studies, the decline of the Irish language and its replacement with English and the rise to dominance of French, to illustrate the centrality of power relations in the construction of national languages. As May points out, language death seldom occurs in communities of wealth and privilege. In Chapter 5 the focus is on education, both its role in helping to create a unified nation-state and its inability to reverse or even halt language shift without sufficient support in other sectors of society, both private and public.

The remainder of the book is dedicated to detailed case examples. In Chapter 6, May discusses the current hegemony of English as a world language. He then compares and contrasts two very different responses to this in the United States and Canada. In the US, the rise of the English-Only movement is characterised as a substitute for racial politics and anti-immigration sentiment, a view that is shared by Schmid whose book is dedicated to a detailed examination of this debate. The movement to protect and promote French in Québec, and to a lesser extent the rest of Canada, provides an interesting contrast. May concludes that laws promoting French in Québec are not illiberal because although they are restrictive in some senses, cultural and linguistic pluralism are actively fostered. In the US, on the other hand, English only laws are based on a number of misconceptions about language and immigration throughout the history of the US, and constitute an attempt to not only marginalise, but actively penalise, minority language speakers.

In Chapter 7 May extends the discussion to include ethnolinguistic democracy in Europe using Wales and Catalonia as primary examples. He outlines the achievements in the promotion and protection of both languages, but also points out how both examples demonstrate the ongoing contested nature of minority language policy development in modern nation-states. Chapter 8 explores similar issues, but in relation to the claims of indigenous people for greater cultural and linguistic rights, recognition and self-determination. May focuses first on national and international law with respect to the rights of indigenous minorities, and then turns to the case of the Maori and the nascent reformulation of Aotearoa/New Zealand as a bicultural and bilingual nation-state.

In the final chapter May reiterates his main conclusion, that the disavowal of cultural, linguistic and political expression of minority ethnicities is the cause of many problems in the modern world. In saying this he is careful to avoid the reification of ethnic groups, emphasising that all forms of identity are 'permeable, fluid and subject to change' (May 2001: 308). While there is indeed nothing inherent about ethnic identities, they are no less meaningful for it and we ignore their ongoing influence at our peril. May is also keen to remind us that if minority ethnic identities are constructed, so are majority (national) identities. Minority language rights are essential to the maintenance and extension of democracy, and while most aspects of minority language protection can take place under the aegis of individual rights, some recognition of group rights is necessary in some cases (particularly for indigenous groups and national minorities).

Schmid's work on *The Politics of Language* in North America follows her previous work on multilingual Switzerland (Schmid 1981). 'The contention of this study', she writes, 'is that bilingual education and the usage of non-English languages in the public realm has become a substitute for tensions over demographic and cultural change, increased immigration from third world countries, new linguistic based entitlements, and changing attitudes toward racial and ethnic assimilation' (Schmid 2001: 4). The rate of immigration increased nearly twice as fast in the 1980s as in the 1970s, fuelling the perception that newcomers no longer learn English. A significant proportion of these new

immigrants are Spanish speaking, concentrated in the states of California, New York and Florida where the debates over English-only legislation have been most fierce.

The rapid rise of organisations such as US English and English First since the 1980s has taken many by surprise, as has the level of hostility towards language minorities. A key question addressed by Schmid is why laws declaring English as the official language have suddenly appeared on both the state and federal levels after the United States has gone for approximately 200 years without any formal declaration of an official language. This can be answered in part with reference to the importance of an 'imagined' linguistic homogeneity in the development of American nationalism and national identity, in spite of the fact that the US has never been linguistically homogeneous at any point in its history. Schmid asserts that 'In the American context, controversy over Official English and bilingualism is about competing models of Americanism' (2001: 10).

Schmid poses a number of questions about language diversity and language conflict in her introduction. It is worth outlining these here, since Schmid's method is to address each of them systematically in subsequent chapters.

- What are the roots of language policy and conflict in the United States? Were they present prior to the nation's founding, or are they of more recent origin?
- Is the push toward 'English-Only' a new movement, or is it merely ethnic intolerance clothed in a new form? How is it similar or different from the Americanization movement that came before it?
- To what extent is there a right to work or to be educated in languages other than English? Is the United States becoming a 'tower of Babel' with the right to be able to work and be educated in tongues other than English?
- To what extent do attitudes differ between Hispanics and Anglos on language issues and core values? Is the situation in the United States comparable to that in Canada, a bilingual confederation confronted with separation because of ethnic and linguistic tensions?
- How can we explain recent cases of language conflict in Puerto Rico and California? Is language becoming the new dividing line in American society? (Schmid 2001: 11)

In Chapter 2, Schmid outlines the historical background to the current battles over English and bilingualism in the US. She charts developments relating to minority languages, and highlights differences in attitudes towards white and non-white non-English speakers (for example Dutch and German, which were significant minority languages in the period up to World War I, as opposed to Native Americans and Mexicans). In the early years of the Republic language was considered an individual matter for white immigrants so long as they did not threaten the dominant elite. Conquered ethnic groups were never allowed the freedom to maintain their languages (Schmid 2001: 30-1). Schmid concludes that with few exceptions, languages other than English have been merely tolerated rather than embraced.

In Chapter 3 Schmid compares the nativist and Americanisation movements of the first part of the 20th century with the more recent wave of English-only sentiment. She concludes that the US has followed cyclical patterns of welcoming and rejecting language minorities and immigrants, the more accepting periods generally coinciding with good economic times and gaps in the labour market. Significantly the latest wave of rejection has been aimed primarily at Spanish speakers, and there are strong connections between the organisation US English and the anti-immigration group F.A.I.R. (Federation for American Immigration Reform) (2001: 44-5).



Chapter 4 is dedicated to the legal status of languages other than English. In the second half of the 20th century, non-English speaking immigrants do have more legal protections than in earlier decades. However language itself is not protected under the equal protection clause of the Constitution, unless closely linked to discrimination based on national origin, which is protected (Schmid 2001: 58-61). Following a detailed review of the laws and court cases relating to the English-only movement, Schmid admits that rather than promote national unity – the stated aim of the English-only movement – they have done nothing but promote prejudice (2001: 73-4).

Chapter 5 is the weakest chapter in the book. In it, Schmid relies heavily on a variety of attitudes surveys to ascertain views on language, national identity and cultural pluralism in the US, attempting to compare the attitudes of Hispanics and Anglos. There is little critical discussion of the source of these surveys, the sample sizes used, and the problems inherent in attempting to gain a clear picture of something as complex and changeable as social attitudes through survey techniques. In addition, Schmid tends to present the material as if it supports her findings when on occasion it raises as many questions as it answers. For example, if '61% of Hispanics and 84% of non-Hispanics believed that it is a very important obligation of citizenship to speak and understand English' (Schmid 2001: 89), that begs the question of what the other 39% of Hispanics think about the issue. There is also a 23% difference of opinion between Hispanics and non-Hispanics here that is not explored further, and this is just one example among many. She is more successful in showing up some common myths about language and immigrants, such as most immigrants are illegal (not true); they do not learn English (they do, as fast as in the past and faster than immigrants in other countries); they are not patriotic (surveys strongly suggest otherwise); and that bilingualism negatively affects educational achievement (rather, it is subtractive monolingualism that has negative effects, while additive bilingualism to the level of fluency in both languages has beneficial effects on educational achievement).

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the contrasting cases of Canada and Switzerland. The contrast with Canada is meant to counter superficial comparisons that are often drawn between the situation in Québec and Spanish speakers in the US. Schmid considers simplistic suggestions that Spanish/English bilingualism is divisive on the grounds that there has been conflict over French and English in Québec as spurious, considering the completely different history and geographical, social and political context of the two countries (2001: 121). In Chapter 7 she discusses identity and social incorporation in Switzerland in order to suggest an alternative model of integrating linguistic and ethnic minorities into the US polity, though she admits that the territorial aspects of the Swiss approach would be inappropriate except perhaps in the case of Puerto Rico. More might have been said by way of concrete suggestions for how the US might learn from the Swiss experience.

Chapter 8 includes a consideration of three interesting case studies within the United States – the Ebonics controversy in Oakland, California, the question of statehood for Puerto Rico, and the bilingual education controversy in California. Ebonics is a name for the dialect of English spoken by many urban African Americans, called African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) by linguists. The controversy arose when the Oakland School District announced that Ebonics was the normal language for many African-Americans, and that therefore they should be taught through it at least part of the time and be eligible for bilingual education grants. The announcement precipitated a wave of public outcry, and not just by white Americans. The debate illustrates the extent to which issues of 'race', class and language have become tied together in the public mind. The

debate over statehood for Puerto Rico has centred on the language issue – can a territory where 98% of the population speak Spanish become a state, and should English be made the official language in an effort to make statehood more acceptable to the US Congress? Would statehood for Puerto Rico create Québec-like problem for the US? Finally, the debate over Proposition 227 in California, which largely eliminated bilingual education, reveals the extent of polarisation in the US public over bilingualism and identity.

In Chapter 9, Schmid argues that in the debates over the meaning of American identity, 'defensive nationalism' is taking hold, defining the difference between 'us' and 'them' in such a way as to preserve a particular conception of what it means to be American – a conception that for a large proportion of Americans means speaking only English. The heat and bitterness that the controversy over English-only and bilingualism has generated is surprising when one considers that 97% of the population speak English well, a staggering level of linguistic homogeneity in a country made up almost entirely of immigrants and their descendants. Schmid concludes that 'the irony of the recent growth in linguistic defensive nationalism in the United States is that there was never a language so little in need of official support as English at the end of the twentieth century' (2001: 178). She ends with a plea for Americans to see bilingualism as an asset in an age of globalisation, a call that is unlikely to be heard any time soon.

Schmid's book is an interesting read, full of detail and useful information. However, I was left craving more critical discussion of how and why the English-only movement has gained so much ground, given the true level of linguistic competence in English in the US. What can be done about it, and what are the implications for the future of democracy and equality for all American citizens, especially for the Hispanic population?

There are a number of important common issues dealt with by both authors that I would like to briefly highlight. The first of these is multiculturalism. Schmid points out that in the US, language is a 'blind spot' in the ongoing and controversial debate on multiculturalism. In Europe, on the other hand, it tends to be of primary concern in such debates. In keeping with his argument that different types of ethnic minorities should be granted different degrees of institutional support for their language and culture, May sees multiculturalism as tending to distract from the goal of bilingualism and biculturalism for national minorities. However, he suggests that a certain degree of multiculturalism is necessary to ensure the rights of other ethnic and linguistic minorities.

Another common issue is the primacy of national identity above all other forms of identity. As Schmid shows, this is very much demanded in the US, perhaps because it has had to work to forge a common identity for its mostly immigrant-descended population. Ethnic identity has been perceived as a problem in spite of, or perhaps because of, its persistence for some groups over the generations. It is also problematic because the civic culture of the US tends to be more or less synonymous with white Protestant culture, although the dominant group rarely openly acknowledges this. While some attempt has been made to take account of the contributions of Native Americans, African Americans, women and other minorities, there has been a powerful backlash against such efforts to re-write US history. In any case, it is unlikely that the US will adopt a multicultural or bilingual approach in the foreseeable future. There is also considerable debate in Europe over the primacy of national identity, particularly in light of increasing European Union integration. However there is a far greater acknowledgement and a growing recognition of other identities, including regional, ethnic and a supranational European identity. Debates in Europe are as likely to centre



around how to reconcile these multiple identities and their respective loyalties as how to eliminate or minimise them.

Finally, both Schmid and May explore the arguments over group versus individual rights as a basis for the protection of minority languages, although May provides a more comprehensive look at the issue. May discusses liberal theory in relation to group rights in some detail, concluding that it is best to conceive of minority language rights in terms of individual rights, with some acknowledgement of group rights in certain circumstances. Schmid, on the other hand, highlights the different approaches taken by the US, Canada and Switzerland regarding the balance of group and individual rights, with the US recognising only individual rights, Canada opting for the protection of group rights as part of its multicultural policy, and Switzerland combining the two at different levels of government (group rights at the territorial level of the canton, and individual rights when dealing with the central government).

Comparing the work of May and Schmid, it is interesting to note the different directions being taken by the US and Europe in relation to minority linguistic and cultural rights. In spite of the tacit tolerance of languages other than English that has characterised much of the history of the US, it now appears to be going against any form of bilingualism as being potentially divisive. At the same time, much of Europe is attempting to accommodate or even encourage bi- and multilingualism. May would argue that the route the US is taking is more likely to engender future conflict, aside from being the less democratic option. While some in both Europe and the US still cling to the traditional nationalist model of the nation-state, believing it to be the most stable, it clearly does not fit changing circumstances, is highly likely to promote the conditions for conflict, and goes against the very ideals of rights and democracy they claim to hold dear.

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