

Regional Studies of Language and Identity

Edwards, John. 2010. *Minority Languages and Group Identity: Cases and Categories*. IMPACT Studies in Language and Society. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing.

Fishman, Joshua A., and Ofelia García, eds. 2010. *Handbook of Language & Ethnic Identity: Disciplinary & Regional Perspectives*. Volume I, second edition. New York: Oxford University Press.

Vila, F. Xavier, ed. 2012. *Survival and Development of Language Communities: Prospects and Challenges*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

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The language of a group is considered by many to be the means by which its culture is transmitted. Quebecois sovereigntists' and Flemish separatists' demands for greater autonomy, the upcoming Scottish and Catalan referenda on independence, and the current situation in Crimea all show the extent to which language issues may impact politics. The primary challenge in discussing language issues, especially as they relate to identity, is terminology. The typology applied to languages not considered to be widely spoken can be varied. They may be referred to as regional, minor(ity), weak(er), endangered, threatened, or even less-used languages. Each of these terms carries a certain connotation; however, what underlies them all is the notion that their number of speakers is limited in comparison to the world's supranational languages (e.g. English, French, Kiswahili, Mandarin, Modern Standard Arabic, Spanish, etc.).

Fishman and Garcia (2010) provide a wide array of resources to use when contemplating the role that language and ethnicity play in identity formation. This collection of articles is composed of two sections. The first entitled, "Disciplinary, Methodological, and Topical Approaches in the Study of Language and Ethnic Identity," aptly explores the theme through a variety of lenses ranging from psychology to political science and economics. This includes articles focusing on diasporic and signed languages as well as language learning and education. As its title indicates, "Regional Perspectives in the Study of Language and Ethnic Identity," the second section delves into the specifics of major countries and/or regions around the globe. The breadth of this work offers the unacquainted as well as the familiar reader with an up-to-date and comprehensive overview of, if not introduction to, a wide spectrum of issues to consider when looking at language and ethnic identity.

Edwards (2010) provides a more focused framework through which the reader can appreciate the situation and identity of four language communities, namely Irish, Gaelic, Gaelic in Canada, and Esperanto. While these so-called 'small' languages are perhaps not exemplary, they do present an interesting sampling of different scenarios of how a group's heritage language can shape its contemporary identity. Irish is a state language; Gaelic is a recognized minority language in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, but does not have any official status in Canada; and finally, Esperanto is an artificial language. Edwards discusses each of these in their relevant context and how the communities identify with the language. Irish should occupy a stronger position in Irish society, especially since the population supports it so deeply.

Unlike Irish, however, Gaelic has never been the sole language of Scotland. It has been shared with the Germanic Scots and, more recently, English for centuries. Therefore, according to Edwards, the Scottish are not as committed to it as their Celtic cousins. In Canada, however, the language persevered and was at one point the third language of the country after English and French. Finally, Esperanto was created in hopes of alleviating the emotional attachment (whether positive or negative) when using a language as a means of international communication. Edwards explains that English has supplanted each of these languages in all spheres of their respective societies. It should not be vilified, but the attractiveness of English, in particular with regard to social mobility, has been too tempting for these groups. Edwards' principal argument is that many activist or preservation movements are endorsed or created by outsiders, but if the groups themselves are not willing to speak their languages with one another, especially their children, there is little that can be done to assure their survival.

The emergence of the concept of Medium-Sized Language Communities (MSLC), which are defined as having between 1 and 25 million speakers, demonstrates that survival is not solely an issue for so-called 'small' languages. The articles in *Survival and Development of Language Communities* (2009) are the proceedings of a series of workshops held in Barcelona, which focus on MSLCs, namely Czech, Danish, Slovene, Hebrew, Estonian, Latvian, and Catalan. The organizers chose these languages based on three criteria. They had to fit into the aforementioned range of number of speakers and demonstrate continued intergenerational transmission, and the socioeconomic profile of their society had to be post-industrial and informational. Of the eight languages, only Danish has been a sustained state (or national) language. Czech and Slovene were used to varying degrees in their respective countries, but were part of a multinational framework while Estonian and Latvian were actively suppressed by the Soviet regime. Hebrew, on the other hand, was completely revitalized from the status of a near religious relic. All of these languages are now state languages with all of the support that that status entails. Catalan, however, is only official in the microstate of Andorra. The salient point of this collection is that MSLC present unique situations. For instance, in an effort to unify a given language, all of its regional variants (or dialects) could be inadvertently suppressed or eliminated. The authors of several of the articles are keen to highlight that language planning is not a simple affair and often has unintentional secondary effects. For instance, while attempting to reestablish the status a given language once had in society, the language of the former oppressor could easily slip into a position of the oppressed.

Applications to International Education, in Particular Education Abroad

When students at U.S. colleges and universities consider studying abroad, they may not be aware of the complexity that awaits them on the proverbial "other side". This is particularly true in the linguistic realm. The average student who decides to study in Barcelona or Brussels, for instance, is likely to be blissfully ignorant of the role that the local language debate has played in the formation of the city's culture and the potential faux pas he or she might commit by assuming that everyone can be addressed in a particular language. Of course, this is usually addressed soon after arrival on site, but as advisers we need to face our own preconceived notions so that we can better educate the students in our charge before they leave the country.

Perhaps the most important of these notions is that of nationhood. Anderson (1983, 7) defines a nation as "an imagined political community that is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." It is Herder who is most often credited with most resolutely supporting the idea of "one nation, one language," which exemplifies his romantic notion of *Volkgeist* (National

spirit) put forth in mid-eighteenth century Prussia. He sought to create a sense of pride in German language literature and German nationhood that would rival his contemporaries' trend to emulate everything French. This ideological concept emerged shortly before the American and French revolutions and roughly a century before the unification of Germany. Since the written form of language is one vehicle by which literature is transmitted, Herder saw a single national language as a crucial component to laying claim to nationhood. Other examples of using language as grounds for nationhood, at least in the European context, would include Serbian and Croatian, and Slovak and Czech. In both cases, nationalists focused on and emphasized what distinguished their varieties from the other and used this as justification for creating a separate language, a separate nation, and eventually a separate state (Millar 2005).

Despite two centuries of romantic ideals and contrary to common parlance, a state is not synonymous with a nation. In fact, few states are truly nations insofar as they are not homogenous in their social or ethnic composition. Therefore, discussions of 'national' languages need to be reframed in terms of 'state' languages because the languages of many nations are actually stateless (e.g. Catalan, Irish, Kurdish, Tatar, etc.). This simple distinction can offer insight into the identity of those with whom our students will interact on a daily basis, which may lead to a greater appreciation for their host culture and the intricate role that language plays there. Much of the research on this topic focuses on Europe or European languages. Even in other parts of the world, in Asia for instance, the fervor of nationalism has established so-called national languages, which only belong to a subset of the total population. This discussion, therefore, may be applicable to situations in many parts of the world.

In sum, the study of language through the lenses of identity formation and nation building is neither simple, nor is it new; however, it can lead to a heightened sensitivity and deepened understanding of that which people hold most dear, namely self-perception and -projection. After all, these form part of the very goals that many of us set forth for our students' experiences abroad. If we are able to impart some of this knowledge on our outgoing students, they will be poised to make significant and more substantive inroads into their host culture and, upon their return, gain greater insight to the positive and negative effects of nationalist ideals, whether in relation to their time abroad or interactions with other cultures at home.

Works Cited

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Millar, Robert McColl. 2005. *Language, Nation and Power*. New York: Palgrave.