

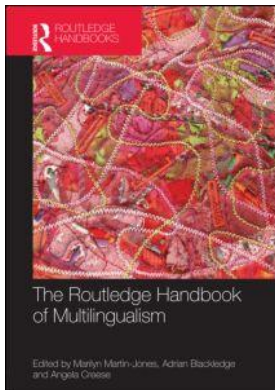
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Language rights

Promoting civic multilingualism¹

Stephen May

This chapter explores the development of language rights (LR) as a nascent academic paradigm, along with its key theoretical and contextual concerns. The growing presence of LR in the disciplines of sociolinguistics, the sociology of language and language policy can be attributed to four distinct, albeit closely inter-related, academic movements. All these movements (discussed further below) adopt the usual distinction between so-called minority and majority languages – a distinction that is based not on numerical size but on clearly observable differences among language varieties in relation to power, status and entitlement – while also paying particular attention to the rights of minority language speakers.

The first of these is the Language Ecology (LE) movement, charting the links between linguistics and ecology, and situating the current exponential loss of many of the world's languages within a wider ecological framework (e.g. Mühlhäusler 1996; Nettle and Romaine 2000). A second is the linguistic human rights (LHR) movement that argues, often on the basis of LE premises, for the greater institutional protection and support of minority language within both national and supranational contexts (e.g. Kontra *et al.* 1999; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). These arguments are also echoed in a third domain of academic legal discourse that has developed with respect to minority group rights generally, but with an increasing focus on the specific implementation of minority language rights (MLR) in national and international law (e.g. de Varennes 1996; Henrard 2000). A fourth, increasingly influential, position has seen a deliberate move away from the biological/ecological analysis of LE, and some LHR arguments, to a more overtly critical sociohistorical/sociopolitical analysis of language rights (e.g. Blommaert 1999; Patrick and Freeland 2004; May 2005a, 2008). This position continues to focus on the importance of minority language rights (MLR), while also addressing social constructionist and post-modernist understandings of language that highlight the constructedness of language(s) and the contingency of the language–identity link. The latter have too often been ignored in other MLR accounts, leading to an overly essentialized view of languages and those who speak them (see May 2005b for a useful overview).

Although these various positions are thus by no means uniform, there is sufficient overlap for them to constitute collectively an increasingly important field of academic enquiry and related advocacy about language rights – particularly, MLR – within sociolinguistics. In line

with the particular emphases of the respective movements discussed above, five key concerns can be identified as underpinning much of this work.

Language shift and loss

The first concern has to do with the consequent exponential decline and loss of many of the world's languages. Indeed, of the estimated 6,800 languages spoken in the world today (Grimes 2000), it is predicted on present trends that between 20 per cent and 50 per cent will 'die' by the end of the twenty-first century (Krauss 1992). Language decline and loss occur most often in bilingual or multilingual contexts in which a majority language – that is, a language with greater political power, privilege and social prestige – comes to replace the range and functions of a minority language. The inevitable result is that speakers of the minority language 'shift' over time to speaking the majority language.

The process of language shift described here usually involves three broad stages. The first stage sees increasing pressure on minority language speakers to speak the majority language, particularly in formal language domains. This stage is often precipitated and facilitated by the introduction of education in the majority language. It leads to the eventual decrease in the functions of the minority language, with the public or official functions of that language being the first to be replaced by the majority language. The second stage sees a period of bilingualism, in which both languages continue to be spoken concurrently. However, this stage is usually characterized by a decreasing number of minority-language speakers, especially among the younger generation, along with a decrease in the fluency of speakers as the minority language is spoken less, and employed in fewer and fewer language domains. The third and final stage – which may occur over the course of two or three generations, and sometimes less – sees the replacement of the minority language with the majority language. The minority language may be 'remembered' by a residual group of language speakers, but it is no longer spoken as a wider language of communication.

Of course, such language loss and language shift have always occurred – languages have risen and fallen, become obsolete, died or adapted to changing circumstances in order to survive, throughout the course of human history. But never to this extent, and never before at such an exponential rate. Some sociolinguistic commentators have even described it as a form of 'linguistic genocide' (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Such claims may seem overwrought and/or alarmist but they are supported by hard data. For example, a survey by the US-based Summer Institute of Linguistics, published in 1999, found that there were 51 languages with only one speaker left, 500 languages with fewer than 100 speakers, 1,500 languages with fewer than 1,000 speakers and more than 3,000 languages with fewer than 10,000 speakers. The survey went on to reveal that as many as 5,000 of the world's more than 6,000 languages were spoken by fewer than 100,000 speakers each. It concluded, even more starkly, that 96 per cent of the world's languages were spoken by only 4 per cent of its people (Crystal 1999).

These figures graphically reinforce an earlier suggestion made by Krauss (1992) that, in addition to the 50 per cent of languages that may die within the next century, a further 40 per cent of languages are 'threatened' or 'endangered'. Given the processes of language shift and decline just outlined, and the current parlous state of many minority languages, it is not hard to see why. Even some majority languages are no longer immune to such processes, not least because of the rise of English as a global language (Crystal 1997; Phillipson 2003). Thus, if Krauss is to be believed, as few as 600 languages (10 per cent) will survive in the longer term – perhaps, he suggests, even as few as 300.

The potential scale and rapidity of language loss predicted here also highlights the inevitable social, economic and political *consequences* for minority language speakers of such shift and loss. Language loss – or linguistic genocide, as Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) would have it – almost always forms part of a wider pattern of social, cultural and political displacement. We can see this clearly if we consider which groups are most affected by language loss – almost always minority groups, which are (already) socially and politically marginalized and/or subordinated. These groups have been variously estimated at between 5,000 and 8,000 and include within them the 250–300 million members of the world’s Indigenous peoples (Tully 1995), perhaps the most marginalized of all people groups. As Crawford (1994) notes, language death seldom occurs in communities of wealth and privilege, but rather to the dispossessed and disempowered. Moreover, linguistic dislocation for a particular community of speakers seldom, if ever, occurs in isolation from sociocultural and socio-economic dislocation.

Nationalism, politics and the minoritization of languages

This brings us to the second principal concern that underlies the advocacy of MLR – why certain languages, and their speakers, have come to be ‘minoritized’ in the first place. Advocates of MLR argue that the establishment of majority/minority language hierarchies is neither a natural process nor primarily even a linguistic one. Rather, it is a historically, socially and politically *constructed* process (May 2005b, 2008), and one that is deeply imbued in wider (unequal) power relations. Following on from this, if languages, and the status attached to them, are the product of wider historical, social and political forces, there is, in turn, nothing ‘natural’ about the status and prestige attributed to particular majority languages and, conversely, the stigma that is often attached to minority languages, or to dialects.

There are two specific points at issue here. The first concerns what actually distinguishes a majority language from a minority language or a dialect. This distinction is not as straightforward as many assume. For example, the same language may be regarded as both a majority *and* a minority language, depending on the context. Thus Spanish is a majority language in Spain and many Latin American states, but a minority language in the USA. Even the term ‘language’ itself indicates this process of construction, as what actually constitutes a language, as opposed to a dialect for example, remains controversial (see Mühlhäusler 1996; Romaine 2000). Certainly, we cannot always distinguish easily between a language and a dialect on *linguistic* grounds, as some languages are mutually intelligible, whereas some dialects of the same language are not. The example often employed here is that of Norwegian, as it was regarded as a dialect of Danish until the end of Danish rule in 1814. However, it was only with the advent of Norwegian independence from Sweden in 1905 that Norwegian actually acquired the status of a separate language, albeit one that has since remained mutually intelligible with both Danish and Swedish. Contemporary examples can be seen in the former Czechoslovakia, with the (re)emergence in the early 1990s of distinct Czech and Slovak varieties in place of a previously common state language. And in the former Yugoslavia, we are currently seeing the (re)development of separate Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian language varieties in place of Serbo-Croat, itself the artificial language product of the post-Second World War Yugoslav Communist Federation under Tito.

What these latter examples clearly demonstrate is that languages are ‘created’ out of the politics of state-making, not – as we often assume – the other way around (Billig 1995). Independence for Norway and the break-up of the former Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia have precipitated linguistic change, creating separate languages where previously none existed. The pivotal role of political context, particularly as it is outworked at the level of the nation-state,

might also help to explain the scale of the projected language loss discussed earlier. One only has to look at the number of nation-states in the world today, at approximately 200, and the perhaps 300 or so languages that are projected to survive long term, to make the connection.

And this brings us to the second key point at issue here: the central and ongoing influence of nation-state organization, and the politics of nationalism, to processes of national (and international) language formation and validation, along with the linguistic hierarchies attendant upon them. In this respect, the model of the linguistically homogeneous nation-state – which has become the normative sociopolitical, as well as sociolinguistic model (c.f. Bourdieu 1982) – is actually only a relatively recent historical phenomenon, arising from the French Revolution of 1789 and the subsequent development of European nationalism. Previous forms of political organization had not required this degree of linguistic uniformity. For example, empires were quite happy for the most part to leave unmolested the plethora of cultures and languages subsumed within them – as long as taxes were paid, all was well. Nonetheless, in the subsequent politics of European nationalism – which, of course, was also to spread throughout the world – the idea of a single, common ‘national’ language (sometimes, albeit rarely, a number of national languages) quickly became the leitmotif of modern social and political organization.

How was this accomplished? Principally via the political machinery of these newly emergent European states, with mass education playing a central role (Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983). The process of selecting and establishing a common national language usually involved two key aspects: *legitimation* and *institutionalization* (Nelde *et al.* 1996; May 2012). Legitimation is understood to mean here the formal recognition accorded to the language by the nation-state – usually, via ‘official’ language status. Institutionalization, perhaps the more important dimension, refers to the process by which the language comes to be accepted, or ‘taken for granted’ in a wide range of social, cultural and linguistic domains or contexts, both formal and informal. Both elements, in combination, achieved not only the central requirement of nation-states – cultural and linguistic homogeneity – but also the allied and, seemingly, necessary banishment of ‘minority’ languages and dialects to the private domain.

If the establishment, often retrospectively, of chosen ‘national’ languages was therefore a deliberate, and deliberative political act, it follows that so too was the process by which other language varieties were subsequently ‘minoritized’ or ‘dialectalized’ by and within these same nation-states. These latter language varieties were, in effect, *positioned* by these newly formed states as languages of lesser political worth and value. Consequently, national languages came to be associated with modernity and progress, whereas their less fortunate counterparts were associated (conveniently) with tradition and obsolescence. More often than not, the latter were also specifically constructed as *obstacles* to the political project of nation-building – as threats to the ‘unity’ of the state – thus providing the *raison d’être* for the consistent derogation, diminution and proscription of minority languages that have characterized the last three centuries of nationalism (see May 2012 for a full overview). As Dorian summarizes it: ‘it is the concept of the nation-state coupled with its official standard language ... that has in modern times posed the keenest threat to both the identities and the languages of small [minority] communities’ (1998: 18). Coulmas observes, even more succinctly, that ‘the nation-state as it has evolved since the French Revolution is the natural enemy of minorities’ (1998: 67).

Proponents of language rights for minority groups argue that the emphasis on cultural and linguistic homogeneity within nation-states, and the attendant hierarchizing of languages, are thus neither inevitable nor inviolate – particularly in light of the historical recency of nation-states, and the related, often arbitrary and contrived, processes by which particular languages have been accorded ‘national’ or ‘minority’ status, respectively. These arguments about the

historical and geopolitical situatedness of national languages also apply at the supranational level. In particular, a number of prominent sociolinguistic commentators have argued that the burgeoning reach and influence of English as the current world language, or *lingua mundi*, is the result of equally constructed historical and political processes, most notably via the initial geopolitical influence of Britain and, subsequently, the USA (see e.g. Pennycook 1994; Phillipson 1992, 2003).

As with the construction of national languages, the current ascendancy of English is also invariably linked with modernity and modernization, and the associated benefits that accrue to those who speak it. The result, MLR proponents argue, is to position other languages as having less ‘value’ and ‘use’ and, by extension, and more problematically, to delimit and delegitimize the social, cultural and linguistic capital ascribed to ‘non-English speakers’ – the phrase itself reflecting the normative ascendancy of English. The usual corollary to this position is that the social mobility of the minority language speaker will be further enhanced if they *dispense* with any other (minority) languages.

Language replacement and social mobility

A third principal concern of proponents of language rights is to critique the principle of ‘language replacement’ that centrally underlies the social and political processes just outlined – that one should/must learn these languages *at the expense of* one’s first language. Consequently, the promotion of cultural and linguistic homogeneity at the collective/public level has come to be associated with, and expressed by, individual monolingualism. This amounts to a form of linguistic social Darwinism and also helps to explain why language shift/loss/decline has become so prominent.

Central to these language replacement arguments is the idea that the individual social mobility of minority language speakers will be enhanced as a result. Relatedly, minority language advocates are consistently criticized for consigning, or ghettoizing minority language communities within the confines of a language that does not have a wider use, thus actively constraining their social mobility (see e.g. Barry 2000; Huntingdon 2005). Little wonder, such critics observe, that many within the linguistic minority itself choose to ignore the pleas of minority language activists and instead ‘exit’ the linguistic group by learning another (invariably, more dominant) language. It is one thing, after all, to proclaim the merits of retaining a particular language for identity purposes, quite another to have to live a life delimited by it – foreclosing the opportunity for mobility in the process. We can broadly summarize the logic of this argument as follows:

- Majority languages are lauded for their ‘instrumental’ value, whereas minority languages are accorded ‘sentimental’ value, but are broadly constructed as obstacles to social mobility and progress;
- Learning a majority language will thus provide individuals with greater economic and social mobility;
- Learning a minority language, although (possibly) important for reasons of cultural continuity, delimits an individual’s mobility; in its strongest terms, this might amount to actual ‘ghettoization’;
- If minority language speakers are ‘sensible’ they will opt for mobility and modernity via the majority language
- Whatever decision is made, the choice between opting for a majority or minority language is constructed as oppositional, even mutually exclusive.

These arguments appear to be highly persuasive. In response, however, proponents of language rights argue that the presumptions and assumptions that equate linguistic mobility *solely* with majority languages are themselves extremely problematic. For a start, this position separates the instrumental and identity aspects of language. On this view, minority languages may be important for identity but have no instrumental value, whereas majority languages are construed as primarily instrumental with little or no identity value. We see this in the allied notions of majority languages as ‘vehicles’ of modernity, and minority languages as (merely) ‘carriers’ of identity. However, it is clear that *all* languages embody and accomplish both identity and instrumental functions for those who speak them. Where particular languages – especially majority/minority languages – differ is in the *degree* to which they can accomplish each of these functions, and this in turn is dependent on the social and political (not linguistic) constraints in which they operate (May 2003). Thus, in the case of minority languages, their instrumental value is often constrained by wider social and political processes that have resulted in the privileging of other language varieties in the public realm. Meanwhile, for majority languages, the identity characteristics of the language *are* clearly important for their speakers, but often become subsumed within and normalized by the instrumental functions that these languages fulfil. This is particularly apparent with respect to monolingual speakers of English, given the position of English as the current world language.

On this basis, advocates for MLR argue that the limited instrumentality of particular minority languages at any given time need not always remain so. Indeed, if the minority position of a language is the specific product of wider historical and contemporary social and political relationships, changing these wider relationships positively with respect to a minority language should bring about both enhanced instrumentality for the language in question and increased mobility for its speakers. We can see this occurring currently, for example, in Wales and Catalonia, with the emergence of these formerly subjugated languages into the public domain – particularly via, but by no means limited to, education.

Likewise, when majority language speakers are made to realize that their own languages fulfil important identity functions for them, both as individuals and as a group, they may be slightly more reluctant to require minority language speakers to dispense with theirs. Or to put it another way, if majority languages do provide their speakers with particular and often significant individual and collective forms of linguistic identity, as they clearly do, it seems unjust to deny these same benefits, out of court, to minority language speakers.

And this brings us to the fourth principal concern of proponents of language rights – the legal protections that can potentially be developed in order to enhance the mobility of minority language speakers while at the same time protecting their right to continue to speak a minority language, *if they so choose*. It is here that the influence of the LHR movement, championed by Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, is most prominent.

Linguistic human rights

The LHR research paradigm argues that minority languages, and their speakers, should be accorded at least some of the protections and institutional support that majority languages already enjoy (see e.g. Kontra *et al.* 1999; Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1995; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). These arguments are also echoed in much of the academic legal discourse that has developed in recent years with respect to minority group rights more broadly, (see e.g. de Varennes 1996; Henrard 2000). A central distinction in both discourses is one made between national minority groups and indigenous peoples on the one hand, and ethnic minority groups on the other. The former may be regarded as groups that are historically associated with a

particular territory (i.e. they have not migrated to the territory from elsewhere) but because of conquest, confederation or colonization are now regarded as minorities within that territory. The latter may be regarded as voluntary migrants and (involuntary) refugees living in a new national context (see Kymlicka 1995 for further discussion).

Three key tenets of international law can be applied to the further development of LHR in relation to these two broad minority groupings. The first principle, which is widely accepted, is that it is not unreasonable to expect from national members some knowledge of the common public language(s) of the state. This is, of course, the central tenet underpinning the current public linguistic homogeneity of modern nation-states. However, LHR advocates assert that it is also possible to argue, on this basis, for the legitimation and institutionalization of the languages of national minorities within nation-states, according to them at least some of the benefits that national languages currently enjoy. LHR proponents qualify this by making it clear that the advocacy of such minority-language rights is *not* the language replacement ideology in reverse – of replacing a majority language with a minority one. Rather, it is about questioning and contesting why the promotion of a majority (national) language should necessarily be *at the expense* of all others. By this, they argue, the linguistic exclusivity attendant on the nationalist principle of cultural and linguistic homogeneity can be effectively challenged and contested.

A second principle is that in order to avoid language discrimination, it is important that where there is a sufficient number of other language speakers, these speakers should be allowed to use that language as part of the exercise of their individual rights as citizens. That is, they should have the *opportunity* to use their first language if they so choose. As de Varennes argues, ‘the respect of the language principles of individuals, *where appropriate and reasonable*, flows from a fundamental right and is not some special concession or privileged treatment. Simply put, it is the right to be treated equally without discrimination, to which everyone is entitled’ (1996: 117, my emphasis). Again, this principle can clearly be applied to minority language speakers within particular nation-states.

The third principle arises directly from the previous one – how to determine exactly what is ‘appropriate and reasonable’ with regard to individual language preferences. Following the prominent political theorist, Will Kymlicka (1995), May (2012) has argued, for example, that only national minorities can demand *as of right* formal inclusion of their languages and cultures in the civic realm. However, this need not and should not preclude other ethnic minorities from being allowed *at the very least* to cultivate and pursue unhindered their own historic cultural and linguistic practices in the private domain. In other words, distinguishing between the rights of national and ethnic minorities still affords the latter far greater linguistic protection than many such groups currently enjoy – that is, *active* linguistic protection by the state for the *unhindered* maintenance of their first languages. This protection is applicable at the very least in the private domain and, ‘where numbers warrant’, a principle again drawn from international law, potentially in the public domain as well.

Extending greater ethnolinguistic *democracy* to minority language groups, via LHR, does not thus amount to an argument for ethnolinguistic *equality* for all such groups. Similarly, a call for greater ethnolinguistic democracy clearly does not amount to asserting linguistic equivalence, in all domains, with dominant, majority languages. Majority languages will continue to dominate in most if not all language domains, since, as should be clear by now, that is the nature of their privileged sociohistorical, sociopolitical position(ing). Conversely, arguing that only national minorities can claim minority language rights, as of right, is *not* an argument for simply ignoring the claims of other ethnic groups (see May 2003, 2012 for an extended discussion).

Avoiding essentialism

The final concern of the language rights paradigm – most prominent in more recent work in the area (see the collections by Patrick and Freeland 2004 and May 2005a) – addresses directly the question of how to recognize language rights, while at the same time avoiding essentializing the languages, and their speakers, to which these rights might apply. This difficult balancing act necessarily involves rejecting the ‘essentialist tendency’, closely allied with an often deterministic account of the links between language, identity and the wider ecological system, that is most evident in arguments for LE, as well as in those LHR arguments that are predicated on LE principles (e.g. in the work of Skutnabb-Kangas). Such arguments assume – in their less sophisticated manifestations, explicitly, and even in their most sophisticated forms, at least implicitly – an almost ineluctable connection between language and (ethnic) identity. And yet, this position stands in marked contrast to the widespread consensus in social and political theory, and increasingly in sociolinguistics and critical applied linguistics, that language is at most only a contingent factor of one’s identity. In other words, language does not define us, and may not be an important feature, or indeed even a necessary one, in the construction of our identities, whether at the individual or collective levels (see e.g. Edwards 1994; Brutt-Griffler 2002). This critique on the detachability of language is complemented by a wider constructivist consensus within social theory of the merits of hybridity – that our social, political and linguistic identities are inevitably plural, complex and contingent (see e.g. Makoni and Pennycook 2007).

Clearly then, an acceptance of the contingent nature of the language-identity link, and the wider principle of hybridity, is a necessary prerequisite before language rights can continue to develop further theoretically. However, all is also not quite as it seems, because what constructionist accounts fail to address adequately is the central question of why, *despite* the clear presence of hybrid linguistic identities, historically associated languages continue often to hold considerable purchase for members of particular cultural or ethnic groups in their identity claims. As Canagarajah (2005: 439) observes of this: ‘Hybridity of identity doesn’t change the fact that ethnicity and mother tongue have always been a potent force in community relations ... Change doesn’t mean irrelevance or irreverence. Attachments to ethnicity and mother tongue are resilient, despite their limited value in pragmatic and material terms.’

To say that language is not an inevitable feature of identity is thus *not* the same as saying it is unimportant. Yet many constructivist commentators in (rightly) assuming the former position have also (wrongly) assumed the latter. In other words, they assume that because language is merely a contingent factor of identity it cannot therefore (ever) be a *significant* or *constitutive* factor of identity. As a result, contingency is elided with unimportance or peripheralism – an additional move that is neither necessary nor warranted.

Indeed, this position is extremely problematic, not least because of the considerable evidence that suggests that, although language may not be a *determining* feature of ethnic identity in many geo- and sociopolitical contexts in the world today, it remains nonetheless a *significant* one in many instances. Or to put it another way, it simply does not reflect adequately, let alone explain, the heightened saliency of language issues in many historical and contemporary political conflicts, particularly at the intrastate level (see e.g. Blommaert 1999; May 2012). In these conflicts, particular languages clearly *are* for many people an important and constitutive factor of their individual, and, at times, collective identities. This is so, *even* when holding onto such languages has specific negative social and political consequences for their speakers, most often via active discrimination and/or oppression.

In theory then, language may well be just one of many markers of identity. In practice, it is often much more than that. Indeed, this should not surprise us as the link between language

and identity encompasses both significant cultural and political dimensions. The cultural dimension is demonstrated by the fact that one's individual and social identities, and their complex interconnections, are inevitably mediated in and through particular languages. The political dimension is significant to the extent that those languages come to be formally (and informally) associated with particular ethnic and national identities. These interconnections also help to explain why, as Fishman (1997) argues, a 'detached' scientific view of the link between language and identity may fail to capture the degree to which language is *experienced* as vital by those who speak it. It may also significantly understate the role that language plays in social organization and mobilization.

As for the ongoing concern over essentialism, this too can be addressed directly. Advocacy of MLR does not *necessarily* entail an essentialized, static view of the language–identity link, or a homogenous conception of the wider linguistic group. As Will Kymlicka has argued in relation to minority rights more generally, advocates of such rights are rarely seeking to preserve their 'authentic' culture if that means returning to cultural practices long past. If it were, it would soon meet widespread opposition from individual members. Rather, it is the right 'to maintain one's membership in a distinct culture, and to continue developing that culture in the same (impure) way that the members of majority cultures are able to develop theirs' (1995: 105). Cultural change, adaptation and interaction are entirely consistent with such a position. The crucial difference, however, is that members of the minority are themselves able to retain a significant degree of control over the process – something which until now has largely been the preserve of majority group members. The key issue for minority language speakers thus becomes one of cultural and linguistic *autonomy* rather than one of retrenchment, isolationism or stasis.

Conclusion

It should be clearly apparent from this brief overview that many challenges to the emergent paradigm of language rights still remain. Nonetheless, the development of arguments in support of language rights, particularly for minority groups, has provided a major impetus for rethinking processes of linguistic modernization, via the ascendancy of majority languages, as inevitable, apolitical and unproblematic. In contrast, arguments for minority language rights highlight centrally and critically the wider social and political conditions – and, crucially, their historical antecedents – that have *invariably* framed and shaped these processes of linguistic modernization, particularly with respect to the privileging and normalizing of majority languages within existing social and political contexts – often at the specific *expense* of minority languages. As Jan Blommaert argues, a sociolinguistic approach that fails to take cognisance of these wider sociopolitical and sociohistorical factors takes no account of human agency, political intervention, power and authority in the formation of particular (national) language ideologies. Nor, by definition, is it able to identify the establishment and maintenance of majority languages as a specific 'form of practice, historically contingent and socially embedded' (1999: 7). And yet, as advocates of language rights quite clearly highlight, it is exactly these contingent, socially embedded and often highly unequal practices, that have so disadvantaged minority languages, and their speakers, in the first place.

Moreover, if one can hold onto the fact that the language rights paradigm has so usefully highlighted – that processes of linguistic change are often, if not always the result of wider social and political processes – then this provides a useful basis from which to mount an effective political challenge on behalf of minority languages and their speakers. From this, one can also question and critique the apparently ineluctable link between majority languages,

mobility and ‘progress’, and in turn look to ways in which minority languages may be reconstituted not simply as ‘carriers’ of identity but also as instrumentally useful. The issue of greater autonomy for minority language speakers that emerges from language rights arguments also highlights the need for greater reciprocity and accountability among majority language speakers – extending to minority language speakers the linguistic privileges that they themselves take for granted. After all, if members of dominant ethnolinguistic groups typically value their own cultural and linguistic membership(s), as they clearly do, it is demonstrably unfair to prevent minority groups from continuing to value theirs. That said, convincing majority language speakers of the merits of MLR – which I have elsewhere discussed, following Grin (1995), as the problem of tolerability (May 2000, 2002) – remains a formidable task.

Perhaps the greatest challenge, and opportunity, that the extension of minority language rights affords, however, is the promotion of a far more pluralistic, open-ended interpretation of language and identity, recognizing the potential for holding multiple, complementary cultural and linguistic identities at both individual and collective levels. On this view, maintaining one’s minority ethnically affiliated language – or a dominant language, for that matter – avoids ‘freezing’ the development of particular languages in the roles they have historically, or perhaps still currently, occupy. Equally importantly, it questions and discards the requirement of a singular and/or replacement approach to the issue of other linguistic identities, which, as we have seen, has been the major historical legacy of nationalism and the nation-state system. And finally, such a view, of course, accords far more closely with the often complex linguistic repertoires of individual multilingual speakers themselves. This multilingualism has tended until now to be sanctioned (only) in the private, familial or community realm but, as MLR advocates, there is no reason why such multilingualism could not be extended to, and/or incorporated within, the public or civic realm as well.

Related topics

Discourses about linguistic diversity; regional minorities, education and language revitalization; global English and bilingual education; Indigenous education; Indigenous contexts; multilingual citizenship and minority languages.

Note

- 1 An earlier version of this chapter (May 2008) was published in *The New Sociolinguistics Reader*, edited by Nicolas Coupland and Adam Jaworski.

Further reading

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