

The Politics of Homogeneity: A Critical Exploration of the Anti-bilingual Education Movement

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Introduction

... leaving one's [language and] culture, while possible, is best seen as renouncing something to which one is reasonably entitled. (Kymlicka, 1995: 90)

In this paper, I want to focus on two key aspects of the arguments employed against bilingual education – the issue of social mobility and the issue of political stability.

1. Language and mobility

A key platform of anti-bilingual education rhetoric is the apparently ineluctable link between majority, or dominant languages and subsequent social mobility. Many critics of bilingual education argue, quite convincingly it seems, that the ongoing promotion of a minority language – that is, a language with less power and prestige in a given (national) context – is *actively* detrimental to the mobility of minority language speakers (see, for example, Schlesinger, 1992; Barry, 2000). These critics assert that proponents of bilingual education are therefore consigning, or ghettoizing minority language communities within the confines of a language that does not have a wider use, thus constraining their social mobility.

The stated logic of this argument goes something like this:

- Majority languages are lauded for their 'instrumental' value, while 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, while (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 apply a version of rational choice theory and 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

This is a difficult argument to refute since, whether we like it or not, it does seem that majority languages are those (and only those) that are the most *instrumentally* useful. This is because knowledge of such languages – usually, but not always, national or state-mandated languages – clearly advantages some individuals and groups at the expense of others. Fernand de Varennes summarizes the wider processes and its implications as follows:

By imposing a language requirement, the state shows a definite preference towards some individuals on the basis of language ...

- 1) The state's chosen language becomes a condition for the full access to a number of services, resources and privileges, such as education or public employment....

- 2) Those for whom the chosen state speech is not the primary language are thus treated differently from those for whom it is: the latter have the advantage or benefit of receiving the state's largesse in their primary tongue, whereas the former do not and find themselves in a more or less disadvantaged position... (1996: 86-87; my emphasis)

In effect, speakers of the dominant language are immediately placed at an advantage in both accessing and benefiting from the civic (and economic) culture of the nation-state. A dominant language group usually controls the crucial authority in the areas of administration, politics, education and the economy, and gives preference to those with a command of that language. Concomitantly, other language groups are limited in their language use to specific domains, usually solely private and/or low status, and are thus left with the choice of renouncing their social ambitions, assimilating, or resisting in order to gain greater access to the public realm (Nelde, 1997). Indeed, the whole tenor of the critiques of bilingual education with respect to greater access to social mobility presupposes this position.

For example, the US English Only Movement specifically argues that English is essential for social mobility in US society, or rather, a lack of English is seen to *consign* one inevitably to the social and economic margins. As Linda Chávez, a former President of US English, has argued: 'Hispanics who learn English will be able to avail themselves of opportunities. Those who do not will be relegated to second class citizenship' (cited in Crawford 1992: 172). Guy Wright, a prominent media supporter of English Only policies, takes a similar line in a 1983 editorial in the *San Francisco Examiner*, asserting that 'the individual who fails to learn English is condemned to semi-citizenship, condemned to low pay, condemned to remain in the ghetto' (cited in Secada and Lightfoot, 1993: 47). A more recent example can be found in US English advertising in 1998: 'Deprive a child of an education. Handicap a young life outside the classroom. Restrict social mobility. If it came at the hand of a parent it would be called child abuse. At the hand of our schools ... it's called "bilingual education"' (see Dicker, 2000: 53).

The archetypal example of this thinking, however, is best represented by the judge in Amarillo, Texas who ordered a mother, as a condition of keeping custody of her child, not to speak Spanish to that child at home on the grounds that this was equivalent to a form of 'child abuse':

If she starts [school] with the other children and cannot even speak the language that the teachers and others speak, and she's a full-blooded American citizen, you're abusing that child ... Now get this straight: you start speaking English to that child, because if she doesn't do good in school, then I can remove her because it's not in her best interests to be ignorant. (cited in de Varennes, 1996a: 165-166)

Now it might be easy to dismiss such examples as extreme – certainly, the only ignorance demonstrated here would appear to be the judge's – but, regrettably, these views are not just limited to such cases. This position is also broadly endorsed, for example, by a number of significant academic commentators as well – notably, the likes of Arthur Schlesinger Jr in *The Disuniting of America* (1992) and, more recently, the political theorist Brian Barry in his 2000 book *Culture and Equality* (note, though, that neither are linguists).

More recently still, in a recent major political theory publication, another prominent US political theorist, Thomas Pogge (2003), has argued that parents who opted for an education for their children in a minority language may be 'perpetuating a cultural community irrespective of whether this benefits the children concerned...'. In other words, in Pogge's view, it is illiberal and injurious for parents to 'consign' their children to a minority language education.

In the same volume, two other political theorists, David Laitin and Rob Reich (2003), have also argued that 'individuals have no influence over the language of their parents, yet their parents' language if it is a minority one ... constrains social mobility'. As a result, 'those who speak a minority (or dominated) language are more likely to stand *permanently* on the lower-rungs of the socio-economic ladder' (my emphasis). Indeed, they proceed to observe that if minority individuals are foolish enough to perpetuate the speaking of a minority language, then they can simply be regarded as 'happy slaves', having no-one else to blame but themselves for their subsequent limited social mobility.

Leaving aside the rather patronizing and paternalistic tone of their discussions, the principal problem with the construction of this general argument – in both populist and academic commentary –

is that it confuses cause and effect. It is clear that a lack of knowledge of a dominant language will limit the options for those who do not speak that language variety, for reasons already outlined. But that is not the *only* reason why such individuals might find themselves ‘permanently on the lower-rungs of the socio-economic ladder’. This is because arguments asserting that English is the key to social mobility, and conversely that its lack is the principal cause of social and economic marginalization, conveniently overlook the central question of the wider structural disadvantages facing minority language speakers, not least racism and discrimination. After all, African Americans have been speaking English for two hundred years and yet many still find themselves relegated to urban ghettos (Macedo, 1994). Likewise English is almost as inoperative with respect to Hispanic social mobility in the USA as it is with respect to black social mobility. Twenty five per cent of Hispanics currently live at or below the poverty line, a rate that is at least twice as high as the proportion of Hispanics who are not English-speaking (Garcia, 1995; San Miguel and Valencia, 1998).

Even when language *is* a factor, it may have as much, or more to do with the linguistic intolerance of the state, judiciary, or the workplace, than with the individuals concerned. This is demonstrated clearly, for example, in the legal issue of the right to speak Spanish in the workplace, as seen in *Garcia v. Spun Steak* (1993) for example, when Spanish speakers were denied the opportunity to converse in their first language, or language of choice, even though English speakers are allowed to continue to converse in theirs.¹

2. Language and the nation-state

And this brings me to the second key area that I want to address. Crucially, these arguments around education, language and social mobility are almost always situated within and premised upon a wider framework (or agenda) of maintaining cultural and linguistic homogeneity in the public realm of nation-states (see May, 2001 for an extended discussion here). In other words, while bilingual education may ostensibly be the focus, the wider social and political context also has a significant, perhaps even crucial, role to play in these debates.

In particular, bilingual education is often constructed as a direct threat to the unity of the state. Gary Imhoff, for example, baldly states that ‘language diversity has been a major cause of [international] conflict ... Any honest student of the sociology of language should admit that multilingual societies have been less united and internally peaceful than single-language societies’ (1987: 40). Likewise, in initially promoting English-only legislation in the early 1980s, Senator Samuel Hayakawa proffered the following as his rationale (cited in Nunberg, 1992: 492):

For the first time in our history, [the USA] is faced with the possibility of the kind of linguistic division that has torn apart Canada in recent years; that has been a major feature of the unhappy history of Belgium, split into speakers of French and Flemish; that is at this very moment a bloody division between the Sinhalese and Tamil populations of Sri Lanka.

More broadly, cultural and linguistic homogeneity, represented most clearly via the principle of public monolingualism, is regarded by these same commentators as not just the *best* means but, in many cases, the *only* valid means of social and political organization.

Both assumptions are simply wrong. Taking the second one first. The requirement of speaking a common, usually singular, language is unique to nation-states, and a relatively recent historical phenomenon. It is unique because previous forms of political organization did not require 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. It is historically recent because nation-states are themselves the product of the nationalisms of the last few centuries, beginning most notably with the French Revolution (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 1991).²

That the subsequent establishment of so-called national languages was inevitably an arbitrary and artificial process, driven by the politics of state-making, is also worthy of critical historical interrogation. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that the same language may be regarded as both a majority *and* a minority language, depending on the national context. Thus Spanish is a majority language in Spain and many Latin American states, but a minority language in the USA. Likewise, the distinction often drawn between a ‘language’ and a ‘dialect’ cannot be easily made on linguistic

grounds, since some languages are mutually intelligible, while some dialects of the same language are not. The example often employed here is that of Norwegian, since it was regarded as a dialect of Danish until the end of Danish rule in 1814. But 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 emergence in the early 1990s of distinct Czech and Slovak varieties in place of a previously common language. While in the former Yugoslavia, we are currently seeing the redevelopment of separate Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian language varieties in place of Serbo-Croat which was, itself, the artificial language product of the former Communist Yugoslav Federation. As Nash observes, 'It has been said that "language is a dialect with an army and a navy". And what official or recognised languages are in any given instance is often the result of politics and power interplays' (1989: 6).

In short, the politics of state-making has largely determined the politics of language (and the politics of language education), not the other way around, as any historical account of national language formation will demonstrate.

Second, the assumption that the enforcement of public monolingualism ensures the unity of the state is not only wrong, but – as I have argued in my recent book, *Language and Minority Rights* (2001) – actually a principal reason for fostering *disunity*. Historically, the principal cause of most language-based conflicts has in fact been the *denial* of legitimate minority language rights rather than their recognition. This is true of Canada, Belgium and Sri Lanka – in direct contradistinction to the views of Imhoff and Hayakawa that political conflict and instability in these nation-states is the *result* of minority language accommodation (see above).

In Belgium, for example, there had been linguistic conflict between its two principal language groups – the French and Flemish – since the inception of the Belgian state in 1830. However, much of this had to do with the *de facto* supremacy of French and the concomitant marginalising of Flemish throughout its history, despite the fact that Flemish speakers were a numerical majority. This ongoing conflict led eventually to the adoption of linguistic legislation in 1962-1963 which enshrined the territorial language principle in Belgium, thus ensuring equal linguistic status for Flemish speakers. This legislation divided the country into three administrative regions: Flanders and Wallonia which are subject to strict monolingualism (Flemish to the north and French to the south), and the capital, Brussels, which is officially bilingual. However, even in Brussels the French/Flemish linguistic infrastructure is quite separate, extending to the workplace as well as to the more common domains of administration and education. In short, this means that in the whole country there are only monolingual educational institutions, while administration is also monolingual, even in multilingual regions. That said, it is also clear that the territorial principle adopted in Belgium has contributed significantly to its sociopolitical and economic stability by ensuring the maintenance of group language rights (Baetens Beardsmore, 1980; Blommaert, 1996; Nelde, 1997).

Similarly, the conflict in Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese majority (comprising 75 per cent of the population) and the Lankan Tamils (who comprise 12.5 per cent of the remaining Tamil-speaking population) was initially precipitated by the language question. In 1956, eight years after independence, Sinhala was made the sole official language, replacing English. This language law created much discontent among Tamil speakers who, with limited access to land, had previously looked to the civil service for employment. With the implementation of the official language law, this option was increasingly denied to them also. Moreover, the language measure was the first of many that restricted the rights and opportunities of Tamil speakers. The subsequent Tamil independence movement, which emerged formally in 1973, thus draws its grievances from this wider background of the apparent denial of minority Tamil aspirations by the majority Sinhalese (Fishman and Solano, 1989; see also Little, 1994).

And this brings me back finally to the issue of bilingual education and a central question we keep asking ourselves. Why is it that the weight of research evidence on bilingual education and the actual demographics of minority language speakers are both regularly ignored in debates on bilingual education, particularly, but not solely in the US?

After all, educational and linguistic research over the last 40 years has demonstrated unequivocally that bilingualism is a cognitive advantage rather than a deficit³ and that being educated

in one's first language provides the *most* effective means of subsequently transferring those first language skills to those of a second language. Conversely, we also know that being immersed too early in a second language, such as the English-immersion educational approaches advocated for Spanish speakers in the US, has been found to be the *least* effective educational approach for achieving first-to-second language transfer (Ramírez, et al, 1991; Thomas and Collier, 1997), something that even some opponents of bilingual education concede.

And, of course, there is, following from this, the additional inconvenient problem – at least for critics of bilingual education – of explaining why 'elite' bilingualism – learning English and French, for example – is acceptable (in fact, to be encouraged, if the recent promotion of heritage language programs in the US is considered) while other forms of bilingual education, or more specifically, Spanish/English bilingual education, are not? As Jim Cummins (2001) has observed, why should bilingualism be good for the rich but not for the poor?

Meanwhile we also know that an implicit, and often explicit, article of faith of those who oppose bilingual education in the US – that non-native speakers of English (particularly first language Spanish speakers) do not want to learn English – is also inconveniently contradicted by the facts. First, less than four per cent of the US population are actually non-English speakers (Amastae, 1990) in the first place (although one would never suspect such a small number, given the hysteria that often surrounds bilingual education debates). Moreover, according to the 1990 US census, 80 per cent of those over the age of five for whom English is not a first language speak English 'well' or 'very well' (Ricento, 1996), while 75 per cent of all Hispanic immigrants speak English frequently each. Indeed, Hispanic immigrants to the US are actually currently shifting to English at a faster rate than was true of European immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century (Baron, 1990). The only distinction of Hispanic communities to this general pattern of language shift is that it takes perhaps one further generation to occur fully – that is, four as opposed to two or three – given the continued influx of monolingual Spanish speakers (Fishman, 1992).

How exactly can we explain this? Why as, Tom Ricento has observed, does the public debate on the merits of bilingual education, (to the extent that there is one) continue 'to focus on perceptions and not on facts' (1996: 142).

The answer, I hope by now, is clear. Arguments for bilingual education cannot carry the day on educational research, or even demographic reality, alone – important those these clearly are. What is required *in addition* is a deconstruction of the key underlying social and political assumptions of anti-bilingual education rhetoric. These include:

- *the perceived inevitability of public monolingualism*; such monolingualism, as we have seen, is actually only a relatively recent historical phenomenon, the specific product of the formation of modern nation-states, and is therefore neither inevitable nor inviolate
- *the bipolar construction of linguistic identities* (in order to speak the majority language, one must dispense with a minority one); such a view is part and parcel of the ideology of public monolingualism and is contradicted by the realities of the majority of speakers in the world today who are multilingual and, as such, hold and balance a multiple number of linguistic identities on a daily basis
- *the supposed threat of multilingualism to the unity of the state*; which is at worst spurious and, at best, historically misinformed.

Only then can we address more effectively a key feature of the rhetoric against bilingual education – namely, that the central attempt to discredit the educational and linguistic merits of bilingual education is based primarily on the *political* challenge it presents for a monolingual conception of the nation-state and, of course by extension, for monolingual speakers of the dominant language.

Notes

¹ In *Garcia v. Spun Steak* (1993), Spanish-speaking workers lodged a claim of language discrimination, under the 14th Amendment, on the grounds that their employer prohibited them from speaking privately in Spanish to each other while at work. This claim was eventually unsuccessful because the Court declined to examine the principal point raised by the Spanish-speaking workers: that is, if some employees have the privilege of conversing with others privately at work in their primary language, they should not be denied the same privilege (de Varennes, 1996).

² A precursor to the rise of European nationalism in this respect can also be found in the colonialism of the 16th and 17th centuries, particularly in the privileging of, for example, English, Portuguese and Spanish in the Americas by their respective colonial powers (see Blaut, 1993; Mignolo, 1995).

³ There are now close to 150 major research studies, carried out since the early 1960s, which consistently report significant advantages for bilingual students on a range of metalinguistic and cognitive tasks. As a result, it is now widely recognised that bilinguals mature earlier than monolinguals in acquiring skills for linguistic abstraction, are superior to monolinguals on divergent thinking tasks and in their analytical orientation to language, and demonstrate greater social sensitivity than monolinguals in situations requiring verbal communication (see Baker and Prys Jones, 1998; Baker, 2001; Cummins, 1996, 2001; Corson, 1998).

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