Minorités linguistiques et société
Linguistic Minorities and Society

Standardizing Diversity: The Political Economy of Language Regimes, Amy H. Liu. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, National and Ethnic Conflict in the 21st Century Series, 2015, 264 p.

Jean-François Dupré

See table of contents

Explore this journal

Cite this review

Book Review

Standardizing Diversity : The Political Economy of Language Regimes

Amy H. Lɪᴜ. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, National and Ethnic Conflict in the 21st Century Series, 2015, 264 p.

By Jean-François Dupré

University of Ottawa

Standardizing Diversity is a must-read for anyone interested in language politics and recognition. Written by Amy H. Liu, Assistant Professor in the Department of Government, University of Texas at Austin, the book makes one of the most significant theoretical and empirical contributions to the field in decades. Liu's work can be seen as falling into the rational-choice institutionalist tradition, in that she depicts language regimes as political institutions that emerge out of strategic interactions. The writing is sparse, yet engaging, and the author makes a definite effort to provide a robust and transparent methodological framework throughout. This makes her book an excellent model for graduate students and emerging scholars to emulate, and I would strongly recommend its adoption for postgraduate-level methodology courses in politics or general social sciences.

Liu ties in two interesting and highly debated questions: "what explains language regime choice, and what are the economic implications of this choice?" (p. 5). To answer these questions, Liu elaborates an innovative framework that is partly grounded in the literature on ethnic conflict (Introduction and Chapter 2). Liu identifies three basic types of institutional designs for ethnolinguistic management. To the well-established *power-concentrating* (Donald Horowitz) and *power-sharing* (Arend Lijphart) types, Liu adds the category of *power-neutralizing* regimes. If power-concentration results from the recognition of a domestic mother tongue, and power-sharing from that of multiple mother tongues, power-neutralization corresponds to the recognition of a neutral lingua franca. This can be, for instance, a colonial language or a regional language of wider communication which

is not considered a prominent mother tongue domestically. Liu adds one variation to this type: neutralized-sharing, which corresponds to the recognition of a lingua franca together with one or more domestic mother tongues. There are therefore a total of four regime types in Liu's framework.

Methodologically, Liu's framework lends itself to a mixed research design including (qualitative) process-tracing together with two types of quantitative measurements: *quadrachotomous* (the four types of language regimes) and continuous (the extent to which a lingua franca is recognized) (p. 23, p. 83). The regimes can be mapped on a matrix along two dimensions: "the number of recognized languages" (uni- or multilingual) and "the nativity of recognized languages" (mother tongue or lingua franca) (p. 23). It is this *conceptual typology* (p. 29) that guides the author's analysis in the remaining chapters. For methodological reasons, Liu operationalizes language regimes exclusively through the mandated medium(s) of instruction in public schools, thus excluding questions of official or national languages. This peculiarity may reduce the relevance and appeal of the framework for those who are especially interested in language use in and by governments (i.e. bureaucracies, legislatures, courts, or other institutions). However, her justifications for doing so in the context of her large-N study are convincing (pp. 40-44).

In the second part of the book, Liu sets out to answer her first question regarding the determinants of language regime choice. Liu lays out her argument in Chapter 3, "using Indonesia as a motivating example" (p. 18). In that chapter, Liu identifies the level of "politically relevant linguistic heterogeneity" (p. 20) as an independent variable, which operates through three mechanisms (the "three Es"): cultural egoism (the prestige of having one's mother tongue recognized), communicative efficiency, and collective equality. Liu's argument is that language regime choice emerges from governments' attempts to balance the three Es, and she hypothesizes that the more linguistically heterogeneous the polity, the more likely the government is to recognize a lingua franca. In highly heterogeneous contexts, she argues, power-neutralizing regimes are the optimal choice because they lower cultural egoism (the cultural dominance of one or more groups), foster perceptions of collective equality (everybody is equally removed from the lingua franca), and enhance communicative efficiency. The argument is empirically tested in Chapter 4 by way of a quantitative analysis based on a sample of 54 Asian countries (data spanning 1945-2005), and extensive field data from Malaysia and Singapore.

The third and final part of the book answers the second question regarding the economic implications of language regimes. In Chapter 5, Liu argues that while ethnic heterogeneity is generally assumed to be detrimental to growth, "the recognition of a lingua franca has a positive, indirect effect on economic growth" (p. 145). In fact, she shows that what matters is not heterogeneity or homogeneity per se, but the presence (or absence) of a common

denominator. By *standardizing diversity*, a lingua franca might just provide this common denominator. The logic of this relationship rests on two mechanisms, social capital and foreign capital, which are examined in depth in Chapters 6 and 7 respectively. In a nutshell, Liu's argument is that a lingua franca contributes to a sense of national community that transcends ethnolinguistic boundaries, which in turn increases social capital and, by fostering elements like interethnic trust, promotes growth and development. At the same time, a common language, combined with the low levels of ethnic conflict characteristic of power-neutralizing regimes, reduces costs and risks for foreign investors, once again fostering growth. As in the second part of the book, the results are convincing.

A minor reservation concerns potential ambiguities in classifying language regimes on the basis of *objective* power relations. While Liu discusses this issue and presents compelling justifications, special care would be advisable when applying this type of typology and framework to some specific cases. Take Taiwan for example, where Mandarin Chinese has been imposed as the sole state and educational language since the 1950s. Mandarin in Taiwan has consistently been depicted as a neutral lingua franca by Chinese nationalists, but for many Taiwanese nationalists who are also speakers of the Taiwanese or Hakka "dialects", Mandarin is above all the language of the Mainland Chinese minority that ruled the island for decades (even though many Mainland Chinese have had a dialect other than Mandarin as their mother tongue). Therefore, what is perceived as a power-neutralizing regime by some may be perceived as a power-concentrating regime by others. Similarly, the use of any Chinese dialect (Mandarin or other) would also be perceived as a power-concentrating device by Taiwanese Aboriginals, who are of non-Sinitic origins. In other words, classifying regimes in terms of their power attributes may itself become an exercise in power!

Although the focus of the book is largely empirical rather than normative, the analysis also has important implications for political theory. In fact, *Standardizing Diversity* makes a strong case for power-neutralization rather than minority recognition in promoting collective equality in highly heterogeneous contexts (see in particular pp. 63-68). While Liu's focus on lingua francas and their neutralizing potential is, in itself, a much welcome contribution to the field, her innovation may have implications beyond linguistic and ethnic issues. In her conclusion (Chapter 8), Liu briefly shows how different types of power can be neutralized for better efficiency in fields like religion (secularism), law-making (judicial independence), geography (the creation of capital cities in strategic areas), and monetary powers (independent central banks). The bridge this book builds between empirical and normative questions, and between language and other types of power-loaded sociopolitical issues, certainly brings an inspiring and refreshing perspective to the discipline.

Jean-François Dupré
jdupr2@uottawa.ca