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Book Review

State Traditions and Language Regimes

Linda CARDINAL and Selma SONNTAG, Eds.

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015, 288 p.

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In an effort to (re)assert the study of language politics and language policy (LP) within political science, this edited collection brings together contributions from scholars examining a range of case studies under an approach referred to “as state traditions and language regimes.” While some chapters have normative implications, overall the volume remains descriptive and explanatory.

In Chapter 1, Cardinal explores the Supreme Court of Canada's interpretation of the constitutionality of linguistic provisions. She finds that the principle of political compromise underpins a majority of rulings, whereas a small number of recent cases appeal to the principle of linguistic equality. Both principles have different implications regarding the obligations of the federal and provincial governments towards official language minorities. In general, these two principles, along with the notion of federalism, are essential to understanding the push-and-pull of language politics in Canada.

Chapter 2 asks why some countries adopt “overt” LPs whereas others adopt rather “covert” LPs that are embedded into already existing policies. For Sonntag, the United States falls into the covert category because language policies have been incorporated into national security, education and, more recently, economic policies. One of the important lessons of the American example is that the way stakeholders frame LPs is susceptible to have a discernible impact on how languages are perceived—through a solely functional lens, or valued in and of themselves.

Chapter 3 also draws on the distinction between covert and overt LPs. Walsh presents an overview of the history of the Irish language regime and distinguishes between two main phases: a) 1922-1965, referred to as the revival phase, and b) 1965-(...) as the bilingualism phase. The year 1922 corresponds to the implementation of Irish as a compulsory subject taught in national schools, while 1965 is when the government published a White Paper proposing to restore the Irish language as “a general medium of communication” (p. 69). More recently, the global financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath have proved to be of crucial importance in hampering the further development of Irish language policies. Walsh concludes that “Irish has become increasingly minoritized and marginalized in its own nation-state” (p. 75).

In Chapter 4, Szul introduces the reader to the Polish state’s threefold language recognition: national/official, national minority, and regional. The struggle for linguistico-political recognition is illustrated through a comparison of Silesian and Kashubian speakers. The latter is the only minority language that has been given official recognition by the state, through the “regional language” category. Historical episodes and religion have been key factors in the evolution of language dynamics in Poland. In general, language has been used as a tool of nation-building in Poland, which speaks to “both the resilience and the fragility of the traditional nation-state model” in Poland (p. 92).

Political theory makes its entrance in Chapter 5. Reflecting on LPs and globalization, Ives critically appraises “key debates” within studies on World Englishes (WE), English as lingua franca (ELF), and critical applied linguistics. Although these contain important insights, their analyses “obscure state activity, a concern to which political scientists should be able to contribute” (p. 97). To “bring the state back in,” Ives turns to the Gramscian notion of “normative grammar,” which allows one to “capture the subtlety of the myriad of ways in which English is promoted and enforced” (p. 98).

In their comparative study of Belgium and Canada, Turgeon and Gagnon (Chapter 6) argue that “a community’s own representation of its internal diversity is crucial to understanding the politics of representative bureaucracy” (p. 133). They contend that, in Belgium, “the language of administration was simply one element of a broader agenda of state reform” (p. 133), whereas “in Canada, the majoritarian political system made it easier for the prime minister to ensure the adoption of his coalition’s preferences” (p. 133). Echoing these conclusions, Gaspard (Chapter 10) identifies the merit principle in the federal public service as one of the core elements of enduring Canadian state traditions. Her chapter examines the historical roots of this principle. It concludes that while the merit principle initially hampered linguistic equality in the federal public service, it has now “evolved to include official languages” (p. 201).

In one of the more conceptually dense chapters of the volume, Liu (Chapter 7) argues that both the stickiness and changes of language regimes are “largely shaped by coalition politics” (p. 137). In comparing Singapore and Malaysia, she distinguishes three types of lingua franca: colonial, religious, and commercial languages. For her, coalition constraints explain variations in regime types. While “extreme vulnerability forced the politically dominant group to adopt a power-neutralizing language regime” in Singapore, “the lack of a comparable threat [in Malaysia] allowed the politically dominant Malays to concentrate linguistic powers.” (p. 150).

Chapter 8 provides an in-depth analysis of the Mandarin language regime in Taiwan. Dupré explores the factors that can “account for the failure of language regime change and the maintenance of a de facto unilingual Mandarin state tradition” (p. 156). Specifically, these factors include a protracted language shift to Mandarin, a civic identity foregrounded in political institutions rather than Taiwanese culture, and “ethnic underbidding strategies in the context of party politics” (p. 156). Garcia (Chapter 12) examines language education policies in France. She deplores how the already-existing multilingualism among a significant part of the French population (for example, the Basque community) is depicted by the state as rather backward and oriented toward the preservation of a cultural identity. With regard to Basque, Harguindéguy and Itçaina (Chapter 9) find that Euskera language policy was considerably strengthened during the Fifth Republic. Their explanation relies on both endogenous variables, such as the stability of territorial coalitions and the new French policy on regional languages, and exogenous variables, such as “the constant cross-border interaction established since the 1980s among Basque actors from France and Spain” (pp. 182-183).

In Chapter 11, Sarangi presents India’s case of extreme linguistic pluralism. The Eight Schedule (ES) of the Indian constitution officially recognizes twenty-two languages, and still many linguistic communities strive for the institutionalization of their language. In India, “non-inclusion of a language in the ES is viewed as being equal to non-recognition of the linguistic group and their cultural identities, rights, and heritage” (p. 212). For the author, this suggests that “languages are conceived as central to the idea of community and group identity” (p. 212).

In Chapter 13, Baker explores the intricacies of “the language politics of peace-building,” which to her represents “an understudied but significant area of research” (p. 237). She argues that efforts in contemporary peace-building need “to consider the language component of peace-building to a greater extent than has traditionally been the case” (p. 247). Overall, this chapter sheds light on the oft-neglected implications of privileging a language, i.e. English, in an international civil service dedicated to building and fostering peace.

In summary, *State Traditions and Language Regimes* constitutes an eclectic yet innovative edited collection. It brings together a number of cases under the same analytical framework. Scholars from other disciplines have noted how the political science literature on language policy and language politics remains underdeveloped to this day (e.g. Phillipson, 1999; Grin, 2004). In this volume, Safran (p. 262) speaks of a “neglect of language” by political science. Although the theoretical depth of the analyses provided here could have benefitted from in-depth engagement with recent theoretical developments in public policy (e.g. John, 2013; Weible & al., 2009), this book definitely constitutes a welcome contribution to the advancement of knowledge on language regimes. Comparativists and historical institutionalists will find particular interest in the rich empirical and diachronic portraits of cases chosen from across the globe. Altogether, this is an important collection that firmly establishes the state traditions approach as an essential tool for the study of LP.

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