

Introduction

Barring physical abnormalities, all human beings are born as linguistic equals. That is, at birth, any given human baby is endowed with the ability to learn the language of the community in which it is raised. However, the equality that exists at birth soon gives way to the politics of power, to linguistic conflicts, and to the political use of language, one of the tools of power. The importance of language rights to basic human rights such as freedom of identity and access to educational and economic opportunities cannot be overstated: more than 160 nations include specific provisions related to language in their constitutions.

Whether arising through conquest and colonization, immigration, enslavement, or the creation of a political state that ignores “natural” ethnic territories, linguistic minorities have existed at least since the dawn of history, and where there exist linguistic minorities, there also exist language conflicts and issues related to the rights of those minorities to use their languages freely and without prejudice. It is further the case that ethnolinguistic factors are becoming increasingly apparent in global conflicts in the twenty-first century, and must be taken into account alongside religious, ideological, economic, environmental, and resource bases of conflicts. Ethnolinguistic nationalism is resurgent in the face of globalism, and centuries’-old ethnolinguistic rivalries of Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia (temporarily papered over by European colonialism and UN-imposed post-colonial borders) have once again come bursting forth. This volume thus presents an ethnolinguistic view of human conflict.

With this background in mind, the present book is intended to provide a fundamental understanding of the issues surrounding language rights and how these are integral to human rights in general, as well as to an individual’s definition of personal and cultural identity. It then explores language conflicts in a variety of nations, and shows how those conflicts have affected the rights of certain groups to use their own language, the groups’ efforts to secure those rights, and efforts to deny those rights through legislation and other actions. Through careful and linguistically informed presentations of these matters, the book critically examines the significant intellectual issues underlying what can be an extremely emotionally charged subject.

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The utilization of language data in understanding linguistic conflict and competition requires the competencies and analytical tools of the linguistic discipline (much as cultural data need the expertise of the cultural anthropologist). As any linguist is aware, languages are not holistic, unitary objects, which might be variously held out and compared with one another, as one might compare two gemstones. Rather, they consist of interlocking webs of modular structure: phonology (sound systems), morphology (word-building systems), lexica (inventories of words and word parts), sentence grammars, and conventions of use.

Accordingly, this book introduces the reader to the tools of language description (in a non-technical fashion), affords an understanding of the mechanics of linguistic conflict, and provides an overview of language rights issues and cases. In this way, the book attempts to provide a vehicle for making language issues relevant to non-linguists and show how tools of linguistics can be useful for understanding socio-political phenomena.

By juxtaposing successful and unsuccessful cases, it also gives the reader some idea of possible policy decisions in education, government, media, etc. — that is, it sheds light on applications of academic knowledge. In addition, its comparative approach not only highlights similarities across groups and situations that might be seen as different (how two languages thought of as different are in fact structurally similar; how language conflict situations share some basic similarities), but also showcases the disparate range of possibilities of language structure as well as language conflict situations and their solutions and trajectories.

Content of the Book

This volume is thus partitioned into four sets of chapters. The first three chapters of Part I succinctly introduce (in a minimally technical fashion) three major components of spoken language: phonetics and phonology (the sounds of spoken language and the manner in which they are perceived), lexicon and morphology (the words and affixes with which expressions are built), and grammar and semantics (the rules by which expressions are organized and interpreted). The fourth chapter explains how the gradual process of language change (e.g. the development of Old English to Middle English to Modern English) involves changes in each of these components, and illustrates how language variation (differences between related languages and dialects of the same language) can be understood through reference to them.

Part II, “Language in the World,” introduces the reader to the major roles that language plays in human society, and the ways in which it plays these roles. The first three chapters in this part focus on the role of language in creating and

articulating three sorts of identity: personal, cultural, and national. Chapter 5, on language and personal identity, uses the manner in which personal names are given, changed, and controlled, in order to illustrate both how important language is in creating personal identity and how naming practices reflect the structure of the language that is used to give names as well as the cultural traditions of the society in which naming is practiced. Chapter 6, on language and cultural identity, focuses on the relation between language and thought, showing not only how language and culture mutually influence each other, but also importantly the limitations of that influence. Chapter 7, on language and national identity, describes the contributions of language to national identity and the role of language in building national unity (or, sometimes, in preventing that unity from coming about). This chapter examines the history of national language formation in three post-colonial states: Indonesia, India, and South Africa.

Chapter 8 takes an excursion away from spoken language into the domain of written language and language orthography, discussing the (relatively recent) emergence of writing in human history, the types of writing systems that have emerged, and the role (independent of speech) that writing systems have in representing cultural and ethnic identity. The last chapter in this part presents language rights in the context of, and as a category of, human rights, and discusses the history of language rights in the United States (from English dominance in the American colonies to present-day efforts to make English the official language of the United States).

Part III, “A Typology of Language Conflicts,” presents cases of language conflict and assaults on language rights drawn from around the world. The part is divided into five chapters, with each chapter focused on a particular category of language conflict. Chapters 10–13 each distinguish a different class of minority speakers, based largely on the way in which each group came to be a minority. The classes which form the bases of these chapters are: indigenous minorities (peoples who lived in a region for some substantial period of time before the currently dominant group moved into it) (Chapter 10); geopolitical minorities (minority groups who came to have that status as a consequence of border shifts, wars, and territorial acquisitions) (Chapter 11); dialectal minorities (minority groups who speak, or who are perceived to speak, a “wrong” – i.e. stigmatized – variety of the dominant language) (Chapter 12); and migrant minorities (typically immigrant groups that have moved into a host country and have retained or attempted to retain, to some extent, the language of their own culture and heritage) (Chapter 13). Chapter 14 depicts conflict situations in which there is a straightforward competition for linguistic dominance between two groups, each of whom has at one time or another held the upper hand in that conflict.

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The five chapters devoted to a typology of linguistic conflicts each present conflict cases that are prototypical of the class.¹ The conflict cases presented variously depict the history behind the conflict, its linguistic characteristics, the impact of the conflict on the nations or peoples affected, and the conflict's resolutions (if any). For instance, the chapter on indigenous minorities (Chapter 10) describes the struggles of the Sámi in Norway, Ainu in Japan, and American Indians in the United States. In Chapter 11, we read about the following geopolitical minorities: Hungarians in Slovakia, Hispanics in the southwestern United States, and Kurds in Turkey. Chapter 12, covering minorities of migration, introduces Roma in Europe, Koreans in Japan, and Puerto Ricans in the United States. Chapter 13, on intra-linguistic (dialectal) minorities, discusses Okinawans in Japan and African Americans in the United States. Chapter 14, on competition for linguistic dominance, takes up the cases of Flemish versus Walloons in Belgium, Tamils versus Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, and French versus English in Canada. At the end of each of these five chapters, a small number of "additional cases for exploration" are provided to the reader. These are given in order to stimulate the reader to think further about the class of conflicts depicted and to imagine how and why a particular case fits into a certain class.

The final two chapters of the book, comprising Part IV, "Language Endangerment, Extinction, and Revival," explore the relevance of linguistic taxonomy, ecology, and ownership to the central matter of the book, and then turn to cases of language revitalization (e.g. Welsh) and revival (e.g. Hebrew). Chapter 15 discusses the problems inherent in trying to isolate or count individual languages, the potential negative effects of widespread language death globally, and the ownership of, and control over, linguistic capital and cultural heritage by those who speak a language and those who study it. Chapter 16 takes up the parallel issues: the revitalization of endangered or dying languages and the revival of dead or dormant ones. In both cases, the feasibility of doing so, the determination of its value to the group most affected and others, and the likelihood of success are central to the discussion.

¹ It should be noted that many, if not most, language conflicts are not purely of a single class. For example, the English language–Spanish language conflict in the United States has attributes of a geopolitical minority conflict, a migrant minority conflict, and (to a much lesser extent) a dialectal minority conflict.