

LANGUAGE AND THE RISE OF IDENTITY POLITICS

An Introduction

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In recent decades, the term ‘identity’ has forged an astonishing career for itself in public as well as academic discussions. Journalists and political actors have adopted the notion in their writing and in speeches and have thus contributed to its widespread use (Farred 2000). As various recent studies and publications contend, identity has become a dominant discourse in the public sphere and in politics, as well as in science (Niethammer 2000). The genesis of the concept is closely tied to the emergence of modernity (Jenkins 2004: 10–14), but it was only in the 1950s that the term itself was introduced and made popular within the social sciences (Gleason 1983). In the aftermath of 1968, social movements dealing with feminism, civil rights, gay culture or Black Power promoted the importance of self-identification and often transposed perceptions of individual identities to groups without considering the question of whether personal and collective identities actually function in a similar manner (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

Identity and Identity Politics

Social theorists such as Anthony Giddens (1991) or Manuel Castells (1997) interpret the growing importance of the concept of identity as a result of increasing globalization. According to their arguments, people now find themselves in an area of tension between the two conflicting trends: on the one hand, globalization, and on the other, the search for orientation by

means of identity constructions. In the context of the technological revolution, the transformation of capitalism and the trend towards a greater flexibility within the working world, people tend to invoke the alleged importance of collective identity, be it on the basis of religion, gender, language or culture, or by stressing the importance of affiliation with a nation or an ethnic group.

In spite of the widespread use of the notion of identity, its conceptualization remains difficult and the term itself rather fuzzy, which makes it tricky to deal with notions of identity and identification. Several difficulties can be noted. First of all, as Siniša Malešević (2006: 13) points out, the concept of identity has not only gained almost universal acceptance, but this fact has also resulted in the renunciation of any questioning of its very existence. Nowadays, there seems to be a large consensus to support the idea that every person has an identity, and that groups can be defined through their collective identity. Accordingly, there are practically no discussions on the question of whether or not identities exist in the first place.

Furthermore, there are no accurate determinations of the notion of identity. On the contrary, definitions of identity vary strongly. While it might be useful to differentiate between individual and collective identity, the two phenomena are also frequently mixed together. For instance, we often find deductions from individual identity to collective identity (Straub 2002). This process is facilitated by the fact that people tend to find it difficult to separate personal identity from collective identity, and that symbolic representations of identity are in continuous need of negotiation inside the larger framework of society and its conceptions of a collective identity (Dusche 2010: 84–87). However, according to Jan Assmann (2007: 132), one important difference between the two dimensions of identity lies in the fact that individual identity premises the corporal existence of the person. Collective identity, on the other hand, does not imply an actual, existing social body, but rather something that is socially constructed and used as a metaphor or an imagined variable.

Another problem lies in the fact that identity is at the same time a practical and an analytical category, as pointed out by Brubaker and Cooper (2000). As a practical category, identity is used to pursue political interests. Political entrepreneurs use identity as an instrument to induce people to collective action by referring to an alleged collective identity. This appears to be all the easier to achieve when we consider how the notion of identity is variable and can be filled with diverging content. Given the widespread dissemination of the term, it is also the case that it does not seem necessary in political debates to clarify exactly what is understood by it, or to disclose normative or ideological interests behind its usage. This turns identity into

an 'elastic category that can be made to accommodate whatever requirements the overall argument demands of it' (Bendle 2002: 12).

Similar difficulties arise when identity is used as an analytical category. Like nation, race or ethnicity, identity is often referred to in scientific work in the same way as it is in practice, which means that it is explicitly or implicitly used in a reifying way (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). In an essentialist manner, language, religion or territory can be used as primordial attachments (Geertz 1973) that supposedly act as 'authentic' markers of a fixed and unchangeable collective identity (Smith 1986; Young 1990).

This essentialist view has been widely criticized, and a constructionist approach to the concept of collective identity has been established in wide swaths of the social and cultural sciences (Calhoun 1994; Wimmer 2002). This approach not only underlines the abilities of collective identities to be formed and changed, which renders them multiple, unstable and contingent; it also points to the strategic usage of collective identity in political debates (Castells 1997).

In recent years, the constructivist approach has also been met with criticism. One critique points to the fact that the importance of power structures in legitimizing or delegitimizing particular identities have not been adequately dealt with by constructivists (Bourdieu 1991). A further point of criticism regarding a 'soft' definition of identity is evoked by Brubaker and Cooper (2000), who lament that the characterization of identity as unstable and fragmented ultimately functions more as an expression of certain attitudes than as a description useful for analysis.

Finally, as has also been pointed out in recent research, it is obvious that large segments of the population understand identity in an essentialist way, meaning that this approach should not be wilfully neglected (O'Reilly 2001). As such, concepts of collective identity – be they presented as ethnically or nationally relevant – might suddenly deploy manifest impacts, even if they are analytically deconstructed by the social sciences (Reese-Schäfer 1999).

Overall there appears to be a significant gap or even contradiction between, on the one hand, the importance attributed to collective identities in political or social debates, and on the other, the theoretical debates that deconstruct identities and describe them as multiple, fluid and fragmented (Bendle 2002). This contradiction and the obvious complexity and inconsistency of the concept of identity has led some researchers to propose abandoning the term altogether (Niethammer 2000). Others, such as Brubaker and Cooper (2000), for example, suggest that instead of identity we should refer to the concepts of 'identification' or 'categorization'. As processual, active terms, they make it possible to avoid the problem of reification and make clear that we are talking about situationally and con-

textually framed processes (Ivanič 1998: 11; Jenkins 2004: 15–21). Moreover, the term ‘identification’ asks for specifying agents and therefore puts forward their role in constructions of identity. Finally, this approach takes into account the complexity of collective identity: ‘By considering authoritative, institutionalized modes of identification together with alternative modes involved in the practices of everyday life and the projects of social movements, one can emphasize the hard work and long struggles over identification as well as the uncertain outcomes of such struggles’ (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 16).

Language and Collective Identity

In traditional European political theory, language is generally attributed two different functions (Joseph 2004: 15–17).¹ First, language serves as a tool of communication. People who speak the same language can interact, and it is generally agreed that it is impossible for human beings to live in complete isolation. At the same time, a language can be learned in order to enable communication with another person. Second, language also has a symbolic meaning insofar as it is understood as a fundamental and constitutive element of identity, be it personal or collective identity. To some degree, the two functions of language are contradictory, in the sense that language is closely linked to identity, and yet a language can be learned and used in various situations of communication without achieving deeper meaning in terms of identification.

However, the symbolic link between language and, for example, ethnic identity is one that is frequently evoked in public as well as academic discourse. Language is thereby represented as a core marker of the alleged collective identity of the ethnic group concerned, and is frequently even seen as being essentially synonymous with it. According to O’Reilly (2003: 20), ‘the connection between language, ethnicity and culture can seem so “natural” that it passes without comment unless challenged’. In their function as categories that serve the construction of communities or demarcation from other communities, language or culture may be used as a means of identifying one’s own group and distinguishing it from another group. In this process of inclusion and exclusion, language is referred to as a point of reference for the politicization of cultural difference (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998). Given the extraordinary importance of language in constructions of ethnicity, language politics represent a crucial political and social context in which collective identities are negotiated. In many public debates in linguistically divided societies, language serves as an explanation for diverging political views or varying economic developments.

Thereby, language is closely linked to culture and appears not only as a key marker of collective identity, but also as something that has a great impact on other identity markers (Späti 2012). However, such assumptions overlook the fact that groups may exist that display communal cultural characteristics but speak different languages. On the other hand, there are countries that are composed of different ethnic groups, but whose inhabitants speak the same language.

As a result of the wide range of highly varied concepts of collective identity and a lack of consensus on how to define them – even in academic research – the assumptions that are made about the relationships between identity and language and between ethnicity and language diverge to a large degree. On the one hand, language is understood as an outstanding feature of ethnic identity. Much like religion, culture, mentality or customs, language is seen within this context as a supposedly objective factor that defines a particular ethnic group as such, and provides its members with a feeling of togetherness. But as Benedict Anderson (1991: 145) writes, since language can be learned, it also allows people to ‘be “invited into” the imagined community’ and thereby develop a subjective feeling of belonging to a particular group. However, other authors (e.g., Hamers and Blanc 2002) reject the idea of a ‘one-to-one correlation’ between language and identity. If ethnicity itself is understood as situational and constructed, then it follows that the correlation between language and ethnicity is also the result of a construction (Fishman 1996). Moreover, these authors make the criticism that such a view of a direct relationship between language and identity is driven by a monolingual and monocultural bias, which negates the complex linguistic repertoires of multilingual individuals. In particular, poststructuralist approaches criticize the notion of focusing on a single defining element such as language in the construction of identity and point instead to the hybridity of postmodern identities (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004).

Reference to the nation has played a major role in the construction of collective identities. As has been shown by various nation-building processes in Europe since the nineteenth century, language has been deemed a key marker of national identity (Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990). First, national elites strained to postulate the importance of having a single language as the national language of the new nation-state and regarded its existence as crucial for the functioning of the state. Second, language served as a cultural hallmark of the national community and as a symbolic demarcation from other nation-states. Under these circumstances, many languages were standardized and local vernaculars were abolished. In other words, as Silverstein (2000) puts it, national languages and national identities arose dialectically.

The example of Germany in the nineteenth century shows how language served as a significant tool in the process of community building, since it was understood as a constitutive element, as the medium in which social processes received their meaning and where cultural reciprocity was established (Dittrich and Radtke 1990: 22). Accordingly, in the course of their developmental processes, most nation-states tried to present themselves as monolingual – although de facto they were not. In already existing nation-states, too, the question of language took and continues to take a central place. As the rise of ethnic nationalism shows, language and other categories such as religion or ethnic group are immune to any questioning, and politically mobilized for the purposes of the particular group (Connor 1994). In the mainstream discourse of Western public spheres, language is often used as a central category of community in order to exclude other groups, and as a reference point in the politicization of cultural difference (Wodak et al. 1999).

Language policy is the means by which nation-states govern language issues so important to their constitution. According to Spolsky (2004), language policy in speech communities consists of three components that interact and mutually influence each other: language practices, language management and language ideology. Language practice describes the largely unreflective everyday speech of individuals and linguistic groups. Under language management we understand specific measures and interventions in the sense of policies, which aim at controlling, influencing or changing the language practices of a language group. As a rule, these policies are adopted by individuals or institutions that have a certain decision-making power at their disposal. Finally, language ideology describes beliefs and notions of what proper language practices should be. In other words, language ideology can be understood as ‘the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests’ (Irvine 1989: 255). As such, it has to be taken into account when it comes to the examination of the perceptions and positions of political actors in language policy issues.

Language and Identity Politics

Politics of identity can be defined as ‘a struggle over the qualities attributed, socially and institutionally, to individuals and groupings of individuals’ (Wiley 1994: 131). As such, identity politics are not only politics of recognition (Taylor 1992; Honneth 1995; Fraser 1995), but also of misrecognition (Thompson and Yar 2011), and they are closely associated with questions of inclusion and exclusion. Identity has to be seen as consequen-

tial in terms of allocation, and this allocation concerns resources that are more than just material and economic: 'how you are identified may influence what, and how much, you get' (Jenkins 2004: 174). Moreover, as Bourdieu (1991) has pointed out, the links between identity politics and collective identity are reciprocal. Even though collective identities essentialize somewhat arbitrary divisions among people, once they have been established, they exist as cognitive and mental representations. Identity politics are thus struggles over the monopoly of power to enforce legitimate views of the world, but as such, they also 'make and unmake groups' (Bourdieu 1991: 221).

The variety of ways in which language is seen as an important identity marker in attempts to evoke and strengthen feelings of belonging, and as a vehicle to convey specific cultural characteristics of a community, are reflected in the various contributions to this book.

For a number of different reasons, the book puts a particular focus on the cases of Switzerland and Canada. First, there is a general lack of research studies in English relating to language questions in Switzerland, and the various contributions in this volume therefore close an important research gap. Second, the comparison between Switzerland and Canada provides interesting insights, since the institutional framework of the language politics in the two countries are quite similar, and yet their linguistic policies and their outcomes are quite different (Späti 2015). Third, in both cases, the language politics focus on official languages. It is thus important to also ask about the role and status of autochthonous and immigrant languages as compared to the official languages.

Peter Ives's chapter sets out from the common assumption that there is a clear distinction between the functioning of language as a means of communication and language as a constituent part of identity. However, as he points out, this distinction is blurry as a result of the paradox in the relationship between language and identity. Whereas language constitutes a fundamental part of an individual or collective identity, it is also a learnable structure of communication. In other words, contrary to other features of identity, such as religion or culture, language is a much more permeable aspect of identity, which becomes clear when we consider how individuals can easily be bilingual or multilingual, whereas religious affiliation, for example, generally allows for just a single denomination. After outlining various positions that different authors have taken on this paradox, Ives turns towards Antonio Gramsci's writings on language. Unlike many others, Gramsci refuses to distinguish between the two characteristics of language, but argues instead that they have to be viewed together. This is because during actual linguistic action, both self-identification and the identification of others can occur simultaneously, for instance, when it

is claimed that somebody who does not speak the national language does not belong to the nation.

Peter A. Kraus tackles the complex question of the accommodation of linguistic diversity within the European Union. By observing a repoliticization of language issues all over Europe, he argues that it is the expressive dimension of language that gives it its particular political importance. By acquiring a language, we are at the same time attached to a specific, culturally shaped collective identity. Linguistic recognition is therefore an important policy in order to accommodate diversity – as it presents itself within the European Union, to take one example. However, as Kraus points out, the language politics of the EU refer primarily to the cultural identities that are embodied by the nation-states concerned. Transnational or hybrid patterns of identification play a much smaller role. One can thus say that the EU's identity politics are primarily used in order to underpin the linguistic interests of the nation-states. On the other hand, the English language plays an important role within the EU, and its regular use in practice contradicts to some degree the professed multilingualism within the union. Another challenge emanates from immigration, which has further increased multilingualism within Europe. Kraus points to multilingual cities such as Barcelona or Helsinki, which offer laboratory-like conditions for examining complex linguistic situations and the responses to them suggested by contemporary language politics.

The following chapters deal with language politics within multilingual states containing national or autochthonous linguistic minorities. These examples show that the successful management of linguistic diversity depends on a number of variables ranging from the size of the linguistic groups to the distribution of power and resources and the instrumentalization of collective memories dealing with past injustices and oppression. As Claude Javeau demonstrates for the case of Belgium, the French language held a strong position in the newly founded nation-state, and it was only in the course of the twentieth century that the Flemish language slowly gained an equal standing. It was not only better economic resources and a higher political position that contributed to the dominance of Francophones, but also language ideology that denigrated Flemish as an uncivilized language unfit for educational purposes. The struggle for language equality was accompanied by a rise in Flemish nationalism, which to some degree eventually managed to supersede other identifications based on class. Within the Francophone language group, however, linguistic nationalism does not play an analogous role, and consequently, the ethnic turn that was observable in Flanders did not take place in Wallonia. For the moment, these circumstances prevent the undoing of the Belgian nation-state, whose future nonetheless remains very uncertain.

The Swiss language situation is quite different from the Belgian one, as is shown in the chapter by Christina Späti. The protection of linguistic particularism was already codified in Switzerland's first constitution of 1848. As a consequence, it was possible to avoid the overt domination of one language group over others, as was the case in Belgium or Canada in the nineteenth century. Moreover, Switzerland did not see the formation of a linguistic nationalism, and political and intellectual elites strove to present Switzerland as an antithesis to the European model of one nation, one language. This does not mean, however, that concepts of identity tied to language questions play no role in Swiss political debates. Instead, a dilemma emerged between concepts of a plurilingual collective identity versus the idea that collective identity is closely linked to one language and one language only. In other words, the question is, how to uphold the idea of a plurilingual society when collective identity is usually assumed to be based on one single language?

As Manuel Meune's chapter shows, this dilemma is efficiently solved by the federalist structure of Switzerland and the important role that cantonal affiliation plays for large segments of its population. While no internal nationalist movement challenges the concept of Switzerland as a multilingual nation-state, considerable energy is sometimes invested in evoking monolingual collective identity at the level of the canton, or within a particular language group. As Meune demonstrates on the basis of his empirical research, the 'identity pyramids' obtained by questioning people about the order of importance of their proposed affiliations are highly complex. Ethnolinguistic affiliation, cantonal belonging and minority position all influence the construction of identity, which turns out to be multifaceted and variable.

Focusing on the endangered autochthonous languages in Canada, Donna Patrick's chapter examines the effects that state language politics towards indigenous languages have on the processes of identification within linguistic minority groups. The recognition of language rights plays an important role within identity politics and reinforces the acknowledgement of the importance of language education and the promotion of fluency and literacy in autochthonous languages. As Patrick demonstrates, Canadian language politics towards indigenous peoples has long been shaped by assimilationist policies. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that a rights discourse permitted the formation of distinct linguistic and cultural identifications, which were accompanied by claims to fund bilingual schools and support language programmes. The case of the Inuit represents a particularly interesting example as a consequence of current processes in the Canadian Arctic. Various language initiatives seeking to unite Inuit within and across national borders offer new ways to imag-

ine identification processes at local, regional, national and international levels.

Linguistic diversity can be the result of the existence of national or indigenous minorities, or – as can increasingly be observed in many Western societies – of immigration. As Ronald Schmidt Sr. demonstrates in his chapter, the recent significant increase in immigration in the United States has modified the discursive role of language diversity in identity politics. This is because partisans of assimilationist language policies use the issue of immigration to frame language diversity in the United States as an immigrant phenomenon and consequently demand linguistic adaption within the framework of an English-only strategy. As a consequence of the increasing political success of assimilationism, bilingual education has been abolished in several states. As recent surveys have demonstrated, a language shift towards English is already frequent in the first generation of immigrants, and even more so in the subsequent generation. As Schmidt argues, however, it might be fruitful for Latino activists to counter these tendencies and redeploy the narrative of a multilingual United States.

Assimilationist policies regarding language also play an important role in Switzerland's migration politics, as is shown by Damir Skenderovic. Unlike the United States, Switzerland understands itself as an officially multilingual country. However, this linguistic diversity does not extend to migration languages. Instead, their presence is frequently seen as a threat to the traditional quadrilingualism. While in migration policy debates language competence is often understood as a key to integration, language also frequently serves as a marker of identity and a tool of delimitation towards other nontraditional linguistic groups. As Skenderovic demonstrates, the alleged fragility of the linguistic peace between the four traditional language groups served as an argument to reject a multilingualism that would also include migration languages. Eventually, identity politics based on language thus came to serve as a justification for a selective migration policy, on the pretext that immigration represents a threat to national identity.

Nicole Gallant's chapter also deals with the question of migration languages within an officially bilingual state. In Canada, official bilingualism demands the distribution of Francophone immigration to different parts of the country in order to maintain the linguistic equilibrium between Anglophones and Francophones in a country where the latter account for only 4.25 per cent of the total population outside of Québec. As Gallant shows, the strategies designed to foster Francophone immigration not only collide with the individually oriented official Canadian language and migration politics, but also fail to take communitarian concepts important to Francophone groups sufficiently into account. In practice, Francophone com-

munity organizations in various provinces function as important agents in integration strategies that aim at including new immigrants into the Francophone community. In order to do so, however, the Francophone minority outside Québec had to considerably adjust the imagining of their collective identity.

In the concluding chapter, Robert Gould points to the importance of power structures within language politics. Whereas in all the case studies examined in this book, efforts were made or are still being made to recognize linguistic diversity – efforts that demand considerable exertion from the power holders – other multilingual states have failed to avoid status conflicts among their language groups. As the example of Latvia shows, the framing of language groups plays an important role in reinforcing language politics. Negative attributes assigned to Russian residents are intended to underline demands to foster Latvian as the only official language. Some activists do not even shy away from linking Latvian language competence to citizenship in order to achieve this goal. This is another example of identity politics closely linked to language questions.

As the different chapters of this book show, the notion of collective identity plays various roles in language politics and in the way that language is perceived. Language as such remains a rather weak identity marker. Individuals, societies and institutions may be multilingual, languages can be learned or forgotten due to migration and language shifts occur over generations, resulting in language loss. Yet language appears to play an important role in identity politics, for majorities as well as for minorities, and for inclusive as well as for exclusive purposes. Identity politics thus expresses itself in politics of recognition and misrecognition, in which language is used as an expression of sameness and of difference, of belonging and of dissociation. Language and identity politics continue to take their place at the top of political agendas in contemporary Western societies.

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Notes

1. For a critique of this dichotomy, see Peter Ives's chapter in this book.

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