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Language and Nationalism

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Introduction

The role of language in nationalist projects cannot be outlined without a consideration of the various ways in which nationalism itself has been theorized. This is a large body of literature that continues to proliferate and generate new approaches to the question of nations and nationalism. In many of these approaches, language is seen as a central organizing element of nationalist projects, and in others, language is understood as one element of national culture. However, in all these cases, given the centrality of language to the generation of human community, the question of the specific role of language in nationalism remains.

Conventional scholarship on nationalism organizes theories of nations and nationalism into various schools of thought, the main and most recurrent being primordialism and modernism. Primordialists include those who argue that nations are part of a natural order, ancient and ubiquitous, with modern nations evolving from an enduring descent group. Modernists, on the other hand, treat the nation as a recent, socio-political fact derived from the processes of modernization. Responses to the modernist position give rise to two other schools of thought, which are perennialism and ethnosymbolism. Perennialists, although agreeing with the primordial nature of nations, deny its predestination and see nations as temporally continuous or recurrent in history. Ethnosymbolists, on the other hand, reject the ‘continuism’ of perennialists and give weight to the transformations of modernity, as well as underscoring the wider significance of the ethnie over the longue durée to explain the affective bases of nation formation (Ozkirimli, 2010). There are elaborations of the modernist school of thought extended into both the postcolonial and settler colonial context, in which the role of language is also significant. As a relatively recent approach, postmodernist theorizations of nationalism encompass a highly diverse category of scholars, who unpack the discursive construction of the nation, highlight the fragmentation of contemporary national identities, and unravel the gendered and racialized discourses of nation building. Increasingly postnationalist challenges to the nation-state from both supranationalist and subnationalist perspectives are emerging, and language also plays a key role in these movements.

Despite the impression of clearly delineated categories, it is important to note that in fact there is considerable overlap and contestation about these classifications. Further confusion also arises from the fact that there is little consensus on definitions of nations and nationalism.
across schools of thought as these may vary depending on the approaches taken. As well, the contingent nature of language is not always thoroughly theorized, and language is often given as a clearly bounded and defined category with stable characteristics. Ultimately, the role of language in nationalist projects is determined by the specific framework of nationalism under consideration; thus, in this chapter, I will detail the role of language in the various schools of thought outlined above.

**Historical Perspectives**

**Primordialism**

In the primordialist school of thought, language is a central element around which the nation is organized. Primordialism is commonly associated with the German Romantic era, and one of the names most famously connected with it is Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), who is also credited with being the first to coin the term nationalism. In his prize-winning and influential essay of 1770, *Über den Ursprung der Sprache* (The Origin of Language), Herder links the ideas of reason and language, “Each nation speaks in the manner it thinks and thinks in the manner it speaks . . . . We cannot think without words” (cited in Barnard, 1965: 56). Herder believed that the sustaining and integrating power of language would lead to higher rates of social cohesion, the conscious fostering of a common linguistic medium, and the emergence of a Volk or a “people,” which in turn would give rise to the community’s consciousness of difference from those speaking another language (Barnard, 1965: 58). Herder believed that since diversity was the fundamental characteristic of the universal order, the world must be constituted of many nationalities, so the Volk was a natural division of the human race and endowed with its own language as the embodiment of its soul or character (Barnard, 1965: 58). This also meant that intermixture with other nationalities was to be avoided. The formulation of language and Volk meant a close association between language and politics, which led to a change in the understanding of nation. Thus, a nation was no longer a group of political citizens united under a political sovereign; rather, it was now a separate natural entity, whose claim to political recognition rested on the possession of a common language (Barnard, 1965: 59).

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1835) was one of the most famous disseminators of Herder’s views, and built on them to develop his own theory of national superiority based on supposed linguistic purity. His contention was that German was superior to the French language because it was the original language, whereas French was inferior because it represented an adoption of foreign elements such as Latin (Edwards, 1985: 25). Thus, as the original German was superior to the bastardized French, it followed that the German nation was also superior to the French nation. As Fichte argued, the previous ancestry of those who spoke an original language was unimportant; rather, it was the continuity of the language that mattered most since “men are formed by language far more than language is formed by men” (Fichte cited in Edwards, 1985: 25).

Herder’s ethnolinguistic formulation of the nation set the stage for what in the present day is more popularly known as the blood and belonging form of nation. In this category, groups who perceive themselves as possessing a common culture and language come together to make a political state, with “blood” and language the main criteria for belonging (Wright, 2004: 41). Germany and Japan are the classic examples of this formulation, as nation-states where the main organizing principle is the belief in a common cultural and linguistic heritage. Interestingly, despite Fichte’s emphasis on the purity of the original language, what actually exists throughout the territory of the German state is a broad dialectical continuum and only in the written form is there a hegemonic standard (Wright, 2004: 41). Perhaps it is the weight given to “blood”
belonging that allows for the tolerance of spoken dialectal difference; however, language is very important here because it is a more salient marker than blood and mother tongue is a key concept in this model. It is also clear that in this formulation of nation, one is born in, and cannot become assimilated into, the nation.

There are two advantages to primordial ethnolinguistic nationalism. The first is that as an organizing principle, it is easy to harness and promote since people can understand and respond to its emotional appeal. Furthermore, the promotion of a national language as a primordial marker of a people fits neatly with the promotion of oral and written nationalist imagery and the formation of a manageable political unit (Wright, 2000: 17). The challenges to ethnolinguistic nationalism, however, arise from the universalism and republicanism derived from the Enlightenment and the French and American Revolutions, exemplars of the modernist approach to nationalism.

Modernism

In the modernist account, nations arise out of very specific social, economic, and political circumstances. The modern nation-state emerges with the advent of modernization and the rise of the state alongside the entrenchment of the ideology of nationalism. In this school of thought, language plays a crucial unifying role in the rise of the modern nation, but this standard national language is not so much a primordial essential precursor to nation formation; rather, it emerges through the processes of modernity. Language as a unifying force in the formation of the modern nation-state can most famously be traced back to the French Revolution and the emergence of a national standard of French.

In the aftermath of the French Revolution in the late 18th century, the issue of linguistic unification became a key issue among the demands for a participatory and egalitarian political system. Charged with the preliminary task of carrying out the census, Abbé Grégoire lamented in his report of 1794 that most Frenchmen in fact did not speak the national language but, rather, spoke varieties of patois related to French, resulting in what he described as a “Tower of Babel.” Based on his findings, Grégoire emphasized the political importance of linguistic unification and a common language as an integral part of the Revolution, in order that all citizens could, first, communicate with each other; second, be molded into a “national whole,” and, finally, “to simplify the mechanism of the political machine and make it function more smoothly” (cited in Grillo, 1989: 24). Thus, the advocacy of linguistic unification was a practical, political, and philosophical Revolutionary effort to appropriate French as a language of state and literature from the upper classes and to transform it into French as the language of national identity and political participation for the broader citizenry. This signaled the congruence of the nation, state, and language as a shift away from sovereign power emanating from the king to sovereign power residing in the nation; a fundamentally constitutive moment of the modern nation-state. This move centralized the importance of education, whereby through mass access to teaching in the standardized national language, people would become informed citizens and be able to participate directly on equal terms in the political process. The Revolutionary model of linguistic uniformity in France has given rise to a present-day conceptual framework of integration, where assimilation is compelled through a hegemonic national monoculturalism and monolingualism, and the relationship between nationalism and the mono-ethnic state has become naturalized (Fishman, 1972).

Gellner (1983) builds on this model, with particular emphasis on the importance of communication in industrializing societies. Specifically, he highlights the material changes brought about by industrialization at the end of the 18th century as the main cause of the rise of the
modern nation, with a shift from localized, feudal, agrarian societies to the modern, industrialized population with its literate, mobile, and occupationally specialized division of labor. It is in this move, where the substitutability of the worker – that is, the ability of the worker to move between increasingly complex and differentiated roles – became increasingly important to industrialized work, that Gellner locates the emergence of the modern nation-state and the need for cultural and linguistic standardization, out of which a literate and common culture could evolve. For Gellner, language has a central unitary role as the cement of modern society, but it is mass education to the national standard that is central to the production of fully “technologically competent” citizens. Thus, nationalism flourishes as education and a unified culture set a path to modernity, political legitimacy, and shared cultural and linguistic identity (Gellner, 1983: 55). Gellner’s highly functionalist model, in which a homogeneous nation could be shaped on the basis of a strong state culture due to the requirements of industrialization, gives rise to his important insight that nationalism is primarily a political principle in which the “political and the national unit should be congruent” (Gellner, 1983: 4). Thus, in Gellner’s functionalist account of the emergence of the modern nation-state, the standardized national language is accorded a central function as well.

In Benedict Anderson’s oft-cited book, Imagined Communities (1983), nations are “imagined” out of particular historical and institutional practices. As he specifies, nations are imagined as a “deep horizontal comradeship,” imagined as limited by the finite boundaries of the nation, and imagined as sovereign because of the passing of the divinely ordained, hierarchical, dynastic realm. Anderson explains that it is in the vacuum left in the era of the Enlightenment, with the advent of rationalist secularism, that the idea of the modern nation appears. He states that the emergence of a standardized national language through print capitalism – particularly newspapers – provided the technology for an “imagined linkage,” which made it possible for growing numbers of people to relate themselves to others, even those they would never meet, in profoundly new ways (p. 40). Print capitalism’s restless search for markets forced the production of text in the common words of the masses, which gave fixity to the language of publication and created unified fields of exchange and communications at a lower level than Latin but above the spoken vernaculars, becoming the dominant standard language of the nation (p. 47).

Anderson also emphasizes the affective role of language in nation formation, arguing that all languages seem to appear rooted in the past, and operate to create an image of unisonance and simultaneity that produces a contemporaneous community through such forms as the national anthem. It is in this way that the nation is conceived in language, not blood, and thereby anyone can be “invited” into the imagined community of the nation, which can present itself as simultaneously open and closed (Anderson, 1983: 133). The role of language, and here it is language as the strongly self-identifying mother tongue, is central in suturing together the past, present, and future of the nation in the imagination of the citizen. In the modernist framework, according to Anderson, a national standardized language that emerges out of functionalist needs and unification of the modernized country also serves a key role in binding together an imagined national community across the bounded geographical space of the nation.

**Critical Issues and Topics**

**Perennialism**

As a response to the modernist school of thought, perennialism is most often seen as the bridge between primordial and modernist models of nation building, whereby nations are deemed to be temporally continuous or recurrent throughout human history. Specifically, although particular
nations may come and go, the nation as a form of collective human association and community endures. Adrian Hastings, as the most commonly cited scholar of perennialism, defines ethnicity as “a group of people with a shared cultural identity and spoken language,” which are the building blocks of a nation, and nations themselves are self-conscious communities that emerge across ethnicities as a creation of human communication (Hastings, 1997: 20). Thus, in this formulation, language is a critical element of community formation. As Hastings argues, even in ancient worlds, oral languages became more stable as they took the form of written vernaculars. Consequently, increasingly larger numbers of people could communicate with each other, thereby expanding the vernacular as the universal language of religion, government, and education, and giving rise to what he calls a “proto-nation” (p. 20). For Hastings, this is exemplified in Christian nations, where he links the translation of the Bible into vernaculars – a process he traces back to the 2nd century (p. 195) – as a key catalyst in linguistic unification and the emergence of national consciousness (p. 24). As Hastings underscores, in most models of nationalism, arguments for or against the linguistic bases of nation formation usually focus on orality, whereas he maintains that in reality the recurrent literary bases of linguistic unification underlie the emergence of national consciousness. Hastings rejects Anderson’s modernist thesis that the rise of nations could only happen when the influence of the sacred languages of religion declined; rather, as Hastings’ reading of the Bible shows, Christianity has the use of the world’s vernaculars inscribed into its origins, with neither Hebrew, Greek, nor Latin ever identified as a sacred language. Armenia is identified by Hastings as the first state to become Christian, in the late 3rd century, and notes the survival, into the present, of the Armenian national identity with that of the Armenian Bible, liturgy, and related literature (p. 198). He recognizes the Ethiopian case as a close parallel, where, in a people “as far removed from Enlightenment as conceivable,” national identity was reinforced via vernacular literary traditions from the 14th century on and horizontal mass participation was ensured through the rites and music of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (p. 151).

If Hastings emphasized the role of literary vernacularization as a key linguistic element in his perennialist account of nationalism, Joshua Fishman focused on the important role of language in forging ethnic ties, myths of origin, and familial metaphors in rousing popular support for nationalism. Defining nationalism as the organization of “elaborated beliefs, values, and behaviours that nationalities develop on behalf of their avowed ethnocultural self-interest” (Fishman, 1972: 4), he pointed to the built-in tension between the requirements of modernization and those of authentication. Fishman identified three main attributes of language that answered the political community’s desire for a common cultural heritage alongside the need for modernization. The first was that language could offer a link with the glorious past, where the mother tongue signaled history itself, the second was language as a link to authenticity, and finally, language provided contrastive self-identification from others. Thus, Fishman was clear about both the primordial and modernist links between language and nationalism, which required that language use and language planning both encouraged and facilitated broader unity and deeper authenticity, as well as the various modern implementations of sociocultural and political-organizational integration (p. 66). As the accounts of both these key scholars show, perennialist formations of nationalism are located between, and informed by, primordialist and modernist theories of nation building.

Ethnosymbolism

Ethnosymbolism is another school of thought that emerges out of a critique of modernism and primordialism, as well as a rejection of the continuum of perennialists. Specifically, ethnosymbolists place greater emphasis than the perennialists to the transformations of modernity, even
as weight is given to the importance of premodern ethnic formations in understanding the differences between contemporary nations. Therefore, myths, traditions, values and symbols, are deemed to be significant across the longue durée (i.e., a course of many centuries) to explain the intense group identification, or ethnic consciousness, of the nation. The emphasis on subjective elements of long-term ethnic identifications is a central element of this school of thought, so elements such as language become a symbolic resource in how the ethnie, or ethnic groups with shared myths, memories, and culture, maintain durable identities across temporal shifts and historical forces.

John A. Armstrong, one of the first theorists of ethnosymbolism, examined the significance of the longue durée for nationalism in his seminal book, Nations before Nationalism (1982). Tracing the genealogy of ethnic consciousness across various civilizations, he concludes that ethnic identification finds its meaning not in recognized group characteristics or territorial occupation, but rather by comparison to “strangers” or through exclusion. As Armstrong explains, this differentiation between group and stranger takes place through the “uncanny experience of confronting others,” who “remained mute in response to . . . attempts at communication” (Armstrong, 1982: 5); in this way “large ethnic groupings came to recognize their own relatively close relationship” (p. 5). With this instrumental focus on the communicative aspects of language, Armstrong further elaborates that ethnic distinction through boundary mechanisms requires concentration on linguistic elements that act as “border guards” (p. 242). It is not, however, only the instrumental elements of language that interest Armstrong in the processes of ethnic formation; drawing on the work of linguist Otto Jespersen, he also clarifies that the “high affect” potential of language makes it significant for use in myths and symbols in order to cement affective attachments for ethnic formation.

With an analysis that focuses on premodern civilizations, Armstrong underlines the importance of different ways of life between the territorial fixed, or “sedentary,” as opposed to the nomadic, as well as the significance of religion, particularly Islam and Christianity, to premodern ethnic formation. He argues that premodern ethnic alignments could emerge without recourse to linguistic affiliation as regional dialect continua were more the norm than were clear linguistic divisions. Acknowledging that it is with modernization that language becomes a more salient marker of ethnic group identification he nevertheless identifies religion and politics as the independent variables in relation to linguistic interaction within language families. Thus, language remains a symbolic resource for ethnic identification, with the significance of language “highly contingent” on political and religious forces in the premodern eras and most often a product rather than a cause of polity formation (Amstrong, 1982: 241). Ultimately, in the ethnosymbolist school of thought, language in both its instrumental and affective capacities is an important element of core ethnic grouping and identification but remains a factor that is dependent for its significance on political and religious allegiances across the eras.

Postcolonialism

If perennialism and ethnosymbolism are responses to the polarities of the modernist and primitivist schools of thought, postcolonial and settler colonial nationalisms can probably be understood best as elaborations and reactions to these two foundational approaches to the study of nationalism. Postcolonial nationalisms emerge in the aftermath of anti-imperial and anticolonial struggles to liberate entire regions of the global south from direct colonial rule. The project of nation building for independent postcolonial nations meant the need to create a distinct yet unified national culture and identity while also addressing the legacies of colonialism. These legacies included imposed arbitrary boundaries and borders, communities displaced from traditional
homelands, the institution of hierarchies between groups, remnants of colonial bureaucratic and state structures, as well as colonial languages.

Partha Chatterjee is one notable scholar of postcolonial nationalisms who has tried to outline the specificities of nation building in the wake of colonial rule. Critiquing Anderson’s assertion that the historical experience of nationalism in Europe and the Americas had provided a set of modular forms of nationalism from which the nationalist elites of Asia and Africa could choose, Chatterjee has argued that anticolonial nationalist movements were actually predicated on a *difference* from the modular forms of nationalism propagated by the modern West (Chatterjee, 1986, 2010: 25–26). He elaborates that anticolonial nationalisms operated by addressing both the “material” or “outside” domain of economy and statecraft, which often replicated Western models, as well as the “inner” domain of essential and national “cultural” identity. Thus, although the colonial state structures may have left a legacy in the postcolonial state as part of the material domain, the inner domain was where the fashioning of a non-Western, modern national culture took place. Chatterjee goes on to illustrate his point by outlining how the development of national culture in Bengal in fact began pre-independence in the emergence of unique forms of Bengali drama, literature, art, and schooling that escape the modular influences of European languages and literatures, despite colonial influences. As Chatterjee clarifies, the history of postcolonial nationalisms must account for more than just the material domain of the state as the site of contest with the colonial power; rather, the inner domain of national culture is the site of distinction and unification, as well as contestation, in the re-imagining of the postcolonial nation.

The establishment of postcolonial national culture centers the question of language in the nation building project and raises questions about how to contend with internal heteroglossia and colonial language/s. In particular, with language most often identified as the carrier of culture, the legacy of colonial languages remained, for the nation building project, a highly contested arena. This is best exemplified in the works of anticolonial Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o, who argued that language is indistinguishable from culture as a collective memory bank of people’s experience in history (Ngugi, 1986: 15), and vowed to stop writing in English and publish only in Gikuyu and Kiswahili as a rejection of the colonial legacy of English in Kenya. Similarly, anticolonial scholar Frantz Fanon also maintains that to speak a language is to assume a culture and therefore mastery of the colonial language was directly proportional to the power that the colonized subject could assume (Fanon 1967). This was the common case of colonial rule leaving a material world of bureaucracy and state structures organized through colonial practices and languages to the postindependence nation, now run by bilingual locals and elites who were invested to varying degrees in the maintenance of colonial languages and the privileges these accrued. Therefore, class hierarchies between groups as a legacy of colonial rule were often a factor in the identification of national and official languages for the postcolonial state. As well, in the interest of fostering national culture, the elevation of local languages as signs of national identity were also often marked by the legacy of colonial rule, as different ethnic communities vied for the recognition of their languages. Colonial rule had often left bordering mismatches between national/territorial ethnic communities or had led to ethnic group displacement, which in the postindependence era had ramifications for group recognition and therefore how different communities’ languages fared.

These complexities in the wake of colonial rule meant that the role of languages – both local and colonial – in postcolonial nationalism could not be easily predicted or categorized. Thus, highly multilingual postindependence states have variable language policies. For example, India has developed a three-language formula, where Hindi and English are the official languages at the national level and each state designates an official language. South Africa recognizes
11 official languages including two colonial languages – English and Afrikaans – and nine Bantu languages. In Indonesia, however, only Bahasa Indonesian is the recognized official language despite the presence of hundreds of indigenous languages. These different formulations for recognition of both colonial and local/indigenous languages have emerged as different postcolonial states have been driven by different imperatives for nation building. These imperatives include balancing the need for language in its instrumental capacity for modernization, education, and local/global economic development with language in its symbolic capacity for group recognition, inclusion, and national unity. Ultimately, the role of language in postcolonial nationalism is as complex as its historical particularities and colonial legacies.

**Settler Colonialism**

Settler colonial states have also been called breakaway settler colonies (McClintock, 1992), Creole states (Anderson, 1983) or white settler societies (Stasiulus & Yuval-Davis, 1995), and theorizations of these nation-state forms as a separate category has exploded in the past decade (Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 2006). Ronald Weitzer defines settler states as “founded by migrant groups who assume a super-ordinate position vis-à-vis native inhabitants and build self-sustaining states that are de jure or de facto independent from the mother country and organized around the settlers’ political domination over the indigenous population” (Weitzer, 1990: 24). Thus the three pillars of establishing stable settler rule are: achieving autonomy from the metropole in molding social, political, and economic structures; the consolidation of control over indigenous populations and lands – often through violent and coercive means; and the maintenance of unity within the dominant settler populations (Weitzer, 1990; Stasiulus & Yuval-Davis 1995). States identified as settler nations include Canada, the United States, Australia, and Israel, among others. In settler colonial nations, language is not used to differentiate from respective imperial metropoles; rather, the imperial language is that of the dominant settler group, who often share a common language and/or descent (Anderson, 1983: 50). In the “English dominant nations” (Herriman & Burnaby, 1996), a shared British colonial heritage in these settler states meant that English remains the prominent language in the colonizing process; thus, English was imposed on the indigenous population, which resulted in the denial, suppression, and neglect of indigenous languages, leading to catastrophic language loss. Technologies of language eradication include community displacement and dispossession, impoverishment, and colonial schooling, in particular, residential schooling. Residential schooling, best exemplified in the US and Canada, was a process of removing children from indigenous families in order to “civilize” them by imposing the settler language and completely prohibiting the use of indigenous languages in all contexts (Haig-Brown, 1998). Separated for months and years from their families and punished for any use of indigenous languages, entire generations of residential school victims suffered catastrophic language loss and shift into the dominant settler language. This legacy finds its contemporary expression in either a complete denial or anemic recognition of indigenous language rights, which has done very little to stem the tide of ongoing indigenous language loss and shift.

As settler nations became more established, migration from regions outside the metropole also expanded as labor for settling the nation was required, bringing speakers of other languages to the settler nation. The imperative of settler unity and domination, however, meant that any claims for an expanded, inclusive set of rights for other languages would most often be met with rejection or at best some form of lesser recognition, often couched as vague and underresourced cultural rights (Haque, 2012). This ensures that language shift out of the nondominant first language into the dominant settler language usually takes place within three generations (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009). Further, an emphasis on settler language competence for socioeconomic
integration and mobility means that immigration processes increasingly emphasize settler language competence as a sorting mechanism for immigrant selection and admission; immigrants are increasingly made responsible for their own language training to shift into the dominant language (Haque, 2014).

Canada is an example of a white settler colonial nation that emerged out of the expansion of the second British empire at the end of the 19th century, giving rise to a settler population caught between their colonial location in relation to the metropole, yet colonizers in relation to the indigenous population, who suffered genocide and land dispossession at the direct hands of both French and English settlers. The historical complexity of two settler groups in the Canadian territory meant the establishment of a bilingual compromise in the quest for settler unity, which saw both English and French appointed as the official languages for the first time in 1969 (Haque, 2012). The present legacy of this settler bilingualism compromise has meant that claims for equal linguistic rights for indigenous languages and nonofficial languages continue to remain unrecognized. In short, the historical legacy and sociopolitical structuring of the three pillars of settler rule leads to the naturalization of the imperial language of the metropole as the dominant settler language in the settler colonial nation.

Postmodernism

Postmodern approaches to nationalism vary widely as postmodernism can be understood not only as a historical condition – that is, after modernism – but also as a philosophical and methodological approach that seeks to interrogate and deconstruct all-encompassing conceptions of nationalism (Ozkirimli, 2010: 216). As such, a postmodern approach would not attempt to outline an overarching grand theory of nationalism, as many of the previous approaches described above attempt to do; rather, the contingency, instability, and constructedness of national histories are the focus of postmodernist theorizations of nationalism. Scholars such as Craig Calhoun (1997) thus draw on Foucault’s notion of discourse as “practices that form the object of which they speak” (Ozkirimli, 2010: 206) to define nationalism as a “discursive formation,” which is socially constituted and embedded in relations of power (Calhoun, 1997). For Calhoun, the discursive formation of nationalism gives rise to a “rhetoric of nation,” which depends on a series of features, among them culture that includes “some combination of language” (Calhoun, 1997: 5). However, given the contingency of national histories and forces, the centrality of language as a feature of nationalism depends entirely on the social, political, and historical context out of which the particular nation emerges and so no definitive role of language in nation building can be predetermined.

Building on Calhoun’s insight that the rhetoric of nation escapes definition in a single universal theory, other postmodern scholars have put forward the discursive construction of nationalism in terms of the nation as narration. Homi Bhabha (1990) exemplifies this approach and, given the emphasis on how relations of power are central in postmodern approaches to nation building, this also provides an opportunity to foreground minority and resistance counter-narrations to the dominant national discourses. For Bhabha, these counternarrations emerge out of his approximation of a model of nation building that introduces notions of ambivalence, liminality, and resistance in order to destabilize the certainty of a linear and progressive national history and a homogeneous national subject. This model disrupts a finite conception of the nation and its “origins,” and also ruptures the boundaries of the nation by highlighting the presence of different Others as not just outside the nation but also present within. Bhabha argues that an ambivalent and contentious liminal space emerges within the nation from tensions arising between the nationalist pedagogy of the official dominant narrative of the nation and the
complex lived realities of performative daily life. Within this liminal space there is the possibility of supplementary strategies of resistance that eschew simple confrontation with and negation of dominant national narratives. Specifically, the different or “minority” Other can resist on the terrain of the dominant discourse by insinuating himself into the terms of the national narratives to rework the traditional narrations of the nation.

Bhabha illustrates this resistant strategy as he traces the role of language in nation building. He contends that the Other who speaks the “foreignness of language” (Bhabha, 1990: 315) can split the unisonant narrative of the nation. In his example, Bhabha argues that when the Turkish worker in Germany speaks a German word, the visibility of his difference changes the meanings of the words expressed. For example, when he asks for “coffee” in a bar, what the word signified to the barman was that he was asking for coffee in a bar where he should not be asking for coffee, that is, where he did not belong (p. 316). Thus, the very visibility of the Other makes his words opaque; the meaning of the words are no longer transparent, and they take on the meaning with which the visibility and foreignness of the “alien” imbues them, rendering him silent. Bhabha maintains that this silenced Other is the internal stranger whose languageless presence splits the unisonant nation space. Therefore, the presence of the silent Other does not evoke a harmonious patchwork of cultures; instead, it challenges the totality of national culture by bringing in his history of elsewhere and articulating a counternarration, albeit through silence, of cultural difference that disrupts the national history. Therefore, in Bhabha’s postmodern model of nationalism, language can reveal the relation of the Other to the nation in ways that other universal models of nationalism cannot, creating space for counternarrations to the dominant national narrative. Although no singular model of postmodern nationalism can be outlined, Calhoun and Bhabha demonstrate the contingent nature and discursive construction of nationalism in ways that can allow for a more complex accounting of the relationship between language, nation building, and the Other.

Postnationalism

Any overview of language and nationalism will require a brief discussion of the role of language in the postnational context, where the fundamental architecture of the nation-state is called into question in ways that can challenge issues of national sovereignty and unity (Pujolar, 2007). Although subnational movements have been around as long as nationalism, in the contemporary context a variety of factors are implicated in postnational processes, including demographic diversification due to increased migration, the expanding penetration of information and communication technologies, and, in particular, the increase in political and economic globalization (Pujolar, 2007).

It is important to note that postnationalism does not necessarily destabilize the hierarchies and essentialist ethnocultural dimensions of nation-state discourses, even when couched in the framework of universal rights and linguistic biodiversity (Muehlmann & Duchêne, 2007). Supranational and universalist declarations such as the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights or the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages exemplify these essentializing tendencies as they prioritize the linguistic rights of those identified as historically established territorial minorities over the linguistic rights of those who are identified as im/migrants. Even movements for the maintenance of indigenous languages, whether from the perspectives of biodiversity or of indigenous ontologies, often reproduce the logic of territorialized linguistic rights and replicate the essentialisms and exclusions of nationalist thinking. Subnationalist movements, whether they lead to breakaway states or not, also tend to replicate these hierarchical and essentialist tendencies of the nation-state form. An excellent example is Quebec, where an important
historical struggle for recognition of the rights of francophones has, in the present, evolved into a strong ethnolinguistic nationalism with an entrenched regime of language policing that targets, in particular, the cultural and linguistic choices of immigrant communities and their descendents through the development of increasingly exclusionary policies on language and culture.

Globalization in its many forms also has profound implications for the role of language in postnationalist contexts. The proliferation of communication technologies, as well as the economic and political effects of globalization, have all exacerbated the growth of major-scale regional languages such as Spanish, Mandarin, and Arabic; have entrenched language power blocs such as the Francophonie and the Hispanofonia (Pujolar, 2007: 86), and have led to the explosive expansion of English around the world. Globalization accelerates the commodification and consequent standardization of languages but, in the present, it is English in particular that has charged to the forefront as the international language of globalization, shifting both small and large languages in the global linguistic landscape. Whether English is seen as a force of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), or the language of cosmopolitanism and opportunity (Crystal, 2003), or even as laden with the possibilities of indigenization and reclamation, there is no doubt that at this moment, no other language better exemplifies the postnationalist challenge to national sovereignty, even as it is concurrently mobilized in the service of replicating essentialist hierarchies of authenticity. Thus, although the role of language in postnationalist contexts may call into question issues of national sovereignty and unity, it may also serve to reproduce and reinforce essentialist and hierarchical characteristics of nation-state discourses.

Future Directions

These various models of nation building, although not exhaustive, trace some of the primary ways language has been accounted for in studies of nation and nationalism. Although the operation of language varies widely within each school of thought, as a primary element in the formation of human community, language continues to be a significant and constitutive aspect of nation formation. The communicative and symbolic functions of language provide means of achieving social cohesion and also of enabling political participation. Specifically, in both these functions language operates as a mode of national identification and exclusion, even as the boundaries and defining characteristics of national language/s require ongoing redefinition. As well, the historical and sociopolitical specificities of each national context reveal both the significance and particularities of linguistic convergence in the development of the nation-state (Wright, 2004). Even postnationalist challenges to conventional thinking about the role of language in nationalism can reproduce the essentialist and hierarchical logics of national identification and exclusion. Despite Chatterjee’s (1986) important caveat that all nationalisms are not modular because of the various social and historical antecedents of particular nations, given the centripetal forces of language, the common element of language will continue to be significant across all models of nationalism.

Related Topics

19 Language and Political Economy (McElhinny); 20 Language, Immigration, and the Nation-State (Joan Pujolar); 22 Language in the Age of Globalization (Jacquemet).

References


