Linguistic Diversity In Plurinational States

Abstract

This article examines the politics of language in plurinational states. First, I argue that the relationship between language and nationhood is politically constructed through two broad processes: state nation-building and 'peripheral' activism. Second, I present three broad strategies of territorial management to accommodate the normative and practical issues derived from the politicisation of languages: self-rule, shared rule, and symbolic recognition. Third, I illustrate the discussion drawing on the paradigmatic cases of Catalonia and Flanders.

Introduction

Language policy choices are particularly relevant in linguistically diverse plurinational states. Plurinational states are characterised by the presence of at least two territorially distinct communities with a shared understanding of being a separate political community. Institutionally, states may regulate linguistic diversity in different ways, reinforcing or diffusing disputes between and within groups. Symbolically, language policies affect the relative status of the different languages within the state and that of their respective speakers, which is especially important for minority nations built upon linguistic distinctiveness.

This article is structured as follows. First, I argue that the link between language and nationhood is a relatively recent political construction. I distinguish between two broad processes: state nation-building, with its functional integration of societies and homogenisation of linguistic diversity; and the subsequent reaction of 'peripheral' cultural and political activists. Second, I present ways in which language policies can become strategies of territorial management through self-rule, shared rule, and symbolic recognition. Third, I draw on the cases of Catalonia and Flanders to illustrate that language and nation are linked through political action, thus showing contrasting ways of regulating linguistic diversity, and comparing their respective linguistic disputes.

The Politics of Language and Nationalism

The relationship between language and nationhood is politically constructed. Cultural and political activists mobilise and politicise the 'raw material' or linguistic differences available (Harguindéguy and Cole 2013; Zabaltza 2006). We can identify two broad processes. On the one hand, state nation-building in Europe has generally sought, with varying degrees of success, to achieve linguistic homogeneity as the background condition of political integration. Some languages, such as Castilian in Spain and French in Belgium, were turned into state national language, while others did not. This had normative consequences for the new state languages came to be associated with modernity and progress while others with anachronism and backwardness (May 2001). The British liberal John Stuart Mill famously invoked this notion of hierarchy in his defence of the nation-state as the right setting for a representative government: 'Nobody can suppose that it is not beneficial to a Breton, or a Basque of French Navarre, to be brought into the current of the ideas and feelings of a highly civilised and cultivated people – to be a member of the French nationality, admitted on equal terms to all the privileges of French citizenship ... than to sulk on his own rocks, the half-savage relic of past times, revolving in his own mental orbit, without participation or interest in the general movement of the world. The same remark applies to the Welshman or the Scottish Highlander as members of the British nation' (J.S. Mill 2008: 431).

On the other hand, 'peripheral' cultural and political activists reacted to this functional integration by mobilising in favour of their minority languages and cultures. This is not to say that political entrepreneurs could build anything they like, since there is an interplay between political agency, functional systems, and popular response. We can identify two key stages: the nineteenth century, when activists first mobilised as a result of the German romantic notion that language is the defining factor of the nation; and the second half of the twentieth century, when demands re-emerged with new impetus and within the broader frame of territorial claims to self-government and processes of decentralisation.

The salience of politics means that the link between language and nationhood is contingent. Nations and their link with languages are historically situated human constructions. This challenges the Herderian view that nations are natural, organic language-based entities. The link between language and nationhood is complex and dynamic (Safran 1999). In fact, the role of language within nationalist projects varies through space and time. Language may be the national marker and the central goal of collective nationalist mobilisation. Catalonia provides an example of this at least until recently, when the central goal

of mobilisation has become self-determination. Language may also be the symbol of nationhood without requiring proficiency in the language, as in the cases of Wales and Ireland. Yet there may be national movements not built around linguistic distinctiveness. This is the case of Scotland, where notions of egalitarianism and community are more salient in making the case for national distinctiveness.

Managing Linguistic Diversity in Plurinational States

Politics is not only important in forging and sustaining a link between language and nation, but also in regulating linguistic diversity. Language policy choices may vary in terms of the degree of institutionalisation (e.g. which official language(s), if any); the level of policy responsibility (e.g. central government, or devolved administration, or both); and type of regulation (e.g. accommodationist or integrationist). In linguistically diverse plurinational states, language policies may become strategies of territorial management to appease the demands of minority nations (Swenden 2013).

There are at least three important components to territorial strategies for managing plurinational states: self-rule, shared rule, and symbolic recognition (Keating 2001). The first and the third are especially important when it comes to linguistic diversity. For example, self-rule on cultural and education matters allows sub-state governments to set up measures to protect their minority languages. As minority nationalist parties are usual incumbents in regional offices, they may engage in the linguistic promotion of minority languages as part of their wider sub-state nation-building initiatives. Shared rule gives minority nations the capacity to influence key policy decisions that affect their interests on linguistic matters. Symbolic recognition may include different features around two broad aspects: projecting a state image of diversity (e.g. by recognising more than one national or state language) and recognising the distinctiveness of the various nations comprising the state (e.g. through asymmetric constitutional arrangements).

The Protection of Minority Languages in the EU

What is the role of the European Union in the management of linguistic diversity? Loughlin and Williams (2007) suggest that European integration had the potential to benefit minority languages because it reduced the hegemony of states and their languages and provided new institutional avenues for sub-state activists. Indeed, the EU discourse emphasises linguistic diversity as a core value of the European project; the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights offers a legal protection to minority languages (article 22); and European funding supports initiatives of linguistic revitalisation. Minority language groups also benefit from the protection of the Council of Europe's *Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*. However, the potential for linguistic protection has not fully materialised as the issue remains essentially within the competence area of the Member States (Kraus 2008). The Charter and the Framework Convention are relevant and legally binding documents, but they leave the parties a considerable measure of discretion on the implementation of its provisions. Thus, it is still in domestic politics where we should look for key language policies and political debates on language

Language and Nationalism in Catalonia and Flanders

The cases of Catalonia in Spain and Flanders in Belgium are paradigmatic examples of the politics of language and nationalism in plurinational states and illustrate the key points made above.

Origins

The Catalan and Flemish nationalist movements have been historically built upon language. Cultural activists in the nineteenth century (but also earlier) led cultural and literary movements influenced by Romanticism which expressed

consciousness and pride for the Catalan and Flemish languages and cultures. The romantic 'discovery' of the past and the use of the vernacular constituted a solid base upon which both political nationalisms would draw their legitimacy. The language issue featured prominently in the first political demands of the two movements. For example, the report of the 'Commission of Grievances' (1856), the great manifesto of the Flemish Movement, demanded strict equality of French and Dutch, advocating a future in which every Belgian would be bilingual.

The Catalan and Flemish national movements emerged as responses to (incomplete) state nation-building. The liberals in Spain and Belgium were constructing states that promoted processes of cultural uniformity and chose one language (French in Belgium, Castilian in Spain) to be sponsored and promoted by the state. This fostered a pre-existing diglossia, which meant that there was an unequal distribution of tasks between the languages. Diglossia is grounded in an unequal conception of the languages. This is especially noteworthy in Belgium, where Dutch was (and still is) the majority language. Yet, the liberal French-speaking elite situated French as the high status language and Dutch was considered a mere vulgar dialect and identified with poverty and deprivation.

Linguistic Regulation

Catalonia has two main official languages, Catalan and Castilian, while Aranese (a variety of the Occitan language) is also official in the Vall d'Aran area. At the state level, the Spanish linguistic constitutional design of 1978 gives a prevalent role to the Castilian language as the only state language and the only language which all Spanish citizens are required to know. The constitution kept the centre monolingual in Castilian and the Autonomous communities with languages different from Castilian were made officially bilingual.

In contrast, Flanders is officially monolingual (Dutch is the official language) and language was the main federating criteria in Belgium in 1993. The legislator distinguished in Article 2 between the Flemish, French, and German-speaking communities. There is no single state language, but rather three official languages (Dutch, French and German) which are official in different areas of the state. This is usually labelled the *territoriality principle*, according to which only one language group is officially recognised in each particular territorial unit. The territoriality principle is typically contrasted with the personality principle, which defends that territories should endorse institutional bi- or multilingualism (see De Schutter 2008). I tend to find these labels problematic because all rights are territorial in absence of global justice and because the personality principle is also necessarily instantiated in a particular territory. In practice, the debate is between official monolingualism and official bilingualism, both implemented territorially.

Main Debates

The fundamental tension in the Catalan and Flemish linguistic disputes is between the willingness of Catalan and Flemish authorities to integrate newcomers, on the one hand, and the accusation that integrationist policies are discriminatory for the rights of Castilian- and French-speakers, which are the dominant languages in the rest of the state.

The federalisation of Belgium and other compromises among Belgian political elites have contributed to reduce the intensity of linguistic conflicts in Belgium, which reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s. The place where the linguistic dispute is alive, although attenuated, is the Flemish Periphery of Brussels, the only place where French-speakers outnumber Dutch-speakers. De jure, some towns around Brussels are officially monolingual in Dutch with linguistic facilities for French-speakers in administration and education. De facto, they are multilingual and essentially French-speaking. Some French-speaking political actors, chief among which is the political party DéFI (formerly FDF), argue that this situation discriminates against their linguistic rights. For them, Flemish authorities, which have full legislative powers on the linguistic regime of the area, are infringing rights in their efforts to protect Dutch in the area.

In Catalonia, the dispute focuses on education. Aimed at social cohesion and immigrant integration, the Catalan education system uses Catalan as the only language of instruction in publically funded schools, while Castilian is taught as a subject. Some political actors, chief among which are the political parties, Citizens (C's) and the Popular Party (PP), see this as an illiberal, nationalist imposition that infringes the right of those students wishing to be educated in Castilian. Education is a mostly devolved but partly shared with the Spanish government, and tensions arose recently around the ruling 31/2010 of the Spanish Constitutional Court on the 2006 Catalan Statute of Autonomy and the 2013 Spanish Education Law, which

made the case that Castilian should not only be object of teaching in Catalonia but also a language of instruction.

Concluding Remarks

In plurinational states characterised by linguistic diversity, strategies of territorial management can help to accommodate the normative and practical issues derived from the politicisation of languages. The link between language and nation is endogenous to contingent processes of state nation-building, but once created it may turn languages into powerful markers of national distinctiveness in different ways. Devolution processes in the second half of the twentieth century have contributed to strengthening minority nations' languages, while the European trend towards minority protection is noteworthy in moving away from monolingual frames but less significant in its implications.

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