

***Language Policy and Identity Politics in the United States*** by  
Ronald Schmidt, Sr. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000,  
282 pp.

Reviewed by Aneta Pavlenko  
Temple University

In his influential study on the rise and spread of nationalism, Anderson (1991) astutely noted that nations are "imagined communities" and that in modern times these communities are "conceived in language, not in blood" (p. 145). Indeed, the decision about which language or languages the nation should be conceived in, or, more often, whether there should be more than one language, can be a source of a heated conflict and public unrest. Ronald Schmidt's *Language Policy and Identity Politics in the United States* offers a comprehensive discussion of the language policy conflict in the United States, where in the past three decades language has emerged as a highly emotional and volatile political issue. The text has two main goals: to examine all sides of the U.S. language policy conflict and to offer an approach to language policy which could both meet the criteria of justice for language minority members and ensure the common good for the whole country. The author also has an additional aim: to demonstrate that the conflict over language "is not about language as such but about what kind of political community we are and wish to be" (p.183). From the perspective of applied linguistics, we can also add that this study focuses on the role of language in the construction of national identity.

The book opens with an introduction and is then divided into three sections. The introduction examines the premises of two conflicting approaches to U.S. language policy: linguistic assimilationism and linguistic pluralism. The ranks of assimilationists include the supporters of the English Only and anti-bilingual education movements, such as well-known writer Richard Rodriguez or California billionaire Ron Unz, who spearheaded California's anti-bilingual education bill, Proposition 227. Assimilationists seek policies that will ensure the status of English as the country's only official language. In contrast, pluralists, among them many prominent linguists, educators, and supporters of the English Plus movement, favor using the state to enhance the status and presence of minority languages.

The first section, entitled "The Issues and the Context," sets the background for the discussion and traces the evolution of the U.S. language policy debates over the last three decades. Chapter 1, "Language Policies in Conflict: An Overview," outlines three key areas of disagreement between assimilationists and pluralists: (1) educational policy for language minority children, (2) access to civil

and political rights by non-English-speakers, and (3) the establishment of English as the sole official language of the United States and its political subdivisions. Chapter 2, "Making Sense of Language Policy Conflict," offers a theoretical framework for understanding the nature of language policy conflict and for evaluating claims made by the two sides in the debate. The chapter illuminates the fact that controversies over language are grounded in identity politics, as language policy can be used to facilitate or deny access to valued goods and services in the political economy or to allocate symbolic and material benefits differentially. The chapter also discusses four language policy approaches adopted in different states: domination/exclusion, assimilation, pluralism, and confederation. Domination/exclusion, an approach practiced by the British in their Asian and African colonies, and, more recently, by apartheid South Africa, prevents certain minority groups from learning the language of power and, therefore, from participating in the public domain. Assimilation, an approach assumed in a number of countries, including France, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, and the U.S., aims to eliminate linguistic controversy by encouraging all immigrants and linguistic minorities to shift toward the dominant language. Pluralism, adopted in Canada, Australia, or Nigeria, supports the use of more than one language within common territories of the state. Finally, confederation, an approach taken in Switzerland, Belgium, and India, is based on the assumption that true equality between languages and ethnolinguistic groups can be achieved only if each group can have their own territory in which their language can be dominant.

Chapter 3, "The Social Foundations of U.S. Language Politics," shifts the focus to the United States and describes the preconditions for political conflict in contemporary American society: language diversity, contact, and competition. The chapter also offers a brief discussion of issues of national identity and national unity, which makes clear that while all newcomers may become Americans, some Americans are perceived as (to paraphrase Orwell) more American than others, and thus become "more equal" than others. This discussion is particularly timely in the context of recent debates in the fields of applied linguistics and bilingualism on the nature of links between language and national identity (May, 2001; Pavlenko, 2001; Piller, 2001), as it offers a comprehensive view of sociopolitical and sociohistoric links between languages and identities conceived in different contexts at different points in time.

The second section, "The Arguments," offers an extremely clear and lucid analysis of the competing arguments offered by the two parties in the policy debate. Chapter 4, "Historical Perspectives on U.S. Identity Politics and Ethnolinguistic Inequality," examines two competing historical narratives of the origins of U.S. linguistic diversity. Linguistic assimilationists, in their attempts to understand present language policy problems, view the past exclusively through the lens of the myth of voluntary immigration as a search for freedom, pointing out that throughout history the only path to social mobility in the U.S. has been linguistic acculturation into English. In turn, linguistic pluralists emphasize that many

people of color did not originally become members of U.S. society through immigration and that they have experienced racial oppression throughout much of U.S. history. The oppressive efforts focused, in particular, on disparaging or eradicating the material and symbolic cultures of these groups, including their languages. Chapter 5, "Language Policy and Equality," compares another set of competing narratives: pluralists' and assimilationists' views on the relationship between language policy and social inequality. Pluralists believe that social inequality derives from unequal treatment of minority languages and cultures and argue for public acceptance and recognition of these languages in a wide range of public spaces, which include public schools, voting booths, and the workplace. In turn, assimilationists argue that bilingual education segregates rather than empowers learners, keeping them in subordinated positions, and that the only true path to greater social equality is offered through English immersion. Chapter 6, "Language Policy and National Unity," examines the pluralists' and assimilationists' arguments with regard to the relationship between language policy and national unity. The author demonstrates that the assimilationists' conception of U.S. society as monolingual leads them to view language policy as an instrument for making Americans out of recent immigrants and members of linguistic minorities. On the other hand, pluralists' conception of a multiethnic and multilingual United States leads them to argue that linguistic and cultural diversity may only strengthen the country, especially in a period of increasing globalization such as ours. This clear explanation of the strengths and weaknesses of the pluralists' and assimilationists' arguments is invaluable to all those engaged in language education and curriculum development, and in particular to ESL and bilingual education professionals. Schmidt's arguments raise awareness of ways in which class and race mediate the perception of bilingualism, making it a desirable—albeit not always necessary—attribute of upper- and middle-class children, who are required and encouraged to engage in foreign language learning, and an undesirable attribute of working class minority and immigrant children, who are discouraged from receiving any kind of bilingual education other than a transitional one.

Finally, the third section, "Critique and Reform," rather than taking sides, attempts to recast the debate and point it toward a productive new direction for language policy. Chapter 7, "Flaws at Every Turn," offers a comprehensive critique of alternatives offered by assimilationists and pluralists, as well as by those who suggest the possibility of a linguistic confederation. Subsequently, Chapter 8, "Pluralistic Integration," suggests an approach to U.S. language policy that appears most viable to the author at the present moment. Schmidt notes that while assimilationists ignore the fact that history has constituted the U.S. as a multilingual state, not only through immigration but also through conquest and annexation, pluralists must face the fact that, in the context of English hegemony, bilingual programs are not likely to result in both social equality and first language maintenance (an outcome which defeats one of the pluralists' primary goals). What is required, then, is a language policy that aims for universal bilingualism—sup-

porting the learning of English by non-English speakers while simultaneously aiming at fluency in two languages for all public school students. While many Americans intuitively support this view, Schmidt's book offers invaluable sociopolitical arguments that can strengthen the position of language educators who feel that bi- and multilingualism functions as the primary means to ensure intercultural communication in contemporary global society.

Deeply steeped in a tradition of reading books written by linguists for other linguists, I found a text written by a political scientist, with an in-depth understanding of linguistic phenomena, extremely refreshing. Throughout my graduate school years, I remember working through a myriad of linguistics texts which successfully managed to make the already complex content matter even more abstruse and obscure. In contrast, Schmidt manages to engage the reader and to elucidate and illustrate complex issues of language policy and planning with unmatched analytical precision. The comprehensiveness and depth of the analysis, the convincing and well-argued proposals, and, most importantly, the author's lucid writing style make the text appropriate for adoption not only in graduate but also in undergraduate classes. These classes could be in a variety of disciplines as *Language Policy and Identity Politics in the United States* addresses a very large audience of linguists, educators, policy makers, and scholars in history and ethnic and cultural studies. Placing the U.S. conflict over language in theoretical, comparative, historical, and social contexts, the author compellingly argues that what appears to be a language policy conflict is, in reality, a much larger debate that deals with the appropriate role of non-English languages and cultures in U.S. society, and thus concerns everyone. The discussion is thoroughly grounded in a number of literatures and demographic and census data and offers the most comprehensive and clear analysis of U.S. language policy to date. The importance of the book has already been recognized by the American Political Science Association, which awarded the author a "best book award" from the Section on Race, Ethnicity, and Politics. Now, this important text has to find its way to all those interested in language policy, language planning, language conflict, and language education.

## REFERENCES

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