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## BOOK REVIEW

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**William D. Davies and Stanley Dubinsky, *Language Conflict and Language Rights: Ethnolinguistic Perspectives on Human Conflict* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) 425 pp. ISBN 9781107606586 (softcover)**

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Davies and Dubinsky's book excellently unpacks the complexity of the concept of *language* both as private *property*, intimately linked with the notion of identity (social, cultural, political), but also as a public *property* (the world's right to a diversity of languages). Often treated as a given, the fact that "all humans are born as linguistic equals" (p.1) and with the capacity to learn the language of the community in which they are brought up, is a *right* that encounters numerous challenges in practice. What differentiates one language from another? What differentiates a dialect from a language? Who recognizes them as such and what are the implications of such decisions? Is the protection of a language in the interest of those speaking it - even when the decision is made by the non-speakers? Or is it in the interest of the world to protect the idea of global diversity? These are just a few of the questions that this book raises and addresses.

Divided in four distinct parts, each containing several sections, the book discusses how language has the power to be a common denominator or a source of discord and a tool of oppression. Each part of the book is followed by a "Further Reading and Resources" section which is very useful for the interested reader. The first two parts extensively go into what is understood as language - from sounds to words and their structure, grammar, and language variations (dialects) - to the meaning of language in the context of defining personal, cultural, and national identity. The authors discuss differences between speech and written language, what sets them apart, and the

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distinctions between the objective property of sounds and the mental perceptions and representations of these sounds.

Language is described as an organic construct that is under continuous metamorphoses. Changes in the environment naturally lead to changes in vocabulary, as words are introduced to describe the “new reality” and those that are outlived are abandoned. When words are borrowed from other languages, their transformation can be radical: they undergo a linguistic process through which letters are added, switched or replaced in order to “naturalise” them to the adopting language. The book abounds with examples that help the reader who may be unfamiliar with linguistics to get a clearer understanding of the issues presented. For instance, the authors explain the process of adopting the English word “strike” into Japanese, a language where words do not begin with a mouthful of consonants. In order to accommodate this foreign linguistic object, vowels are added after the “potentially offending consonant” (p. 28). The newly birthed word is “sutoraiki/u”, which is unrecognizable to English speakers. What is interesting is that borrowing a commodity as abstract as words is not only a cultural transfer, but a political act as well. In certain “countries and cultures, lexical borrowing is deemed a threat to the integrity of the indigenous or national language, and it is heartily and officially resisted” (p.32). This is a great point, which is illustrated by the situation in France and Quebec, where borrowing words from English is constantly rejected, and keeping the original terminology in French is a constant struggle for what is perceived as the preservation of identity.

The second part of the book dedicates a section to framing language rights in the context of human rights, thus bridging the transition to the next two parts of the book, which deal with conflict. The authors note that what gives rise to conflict often has to do with cultural differences playing out in a shared space (p.161). Most times, conflict unravels as power leaves no room for equal rights within a society, where the dominant group asserts its position, its identity, and its privileges through imposing constraints on other group(s), through explicit or unstated restrictions on “movement, access, participation in the economy and social life and so on.” (p.161). The authors note that while conflicts in general are not about language per se, “language has been and continues to be a powerful tool (or weapon) in the arsenal of control” (p.162). This section underlines the fact that while the link between language and the issue of human rights may appear as evident, it continues to be controversial. At the one extreme, there is the position that individuals can and should be able to use the language they want, in any given circumstance. At the opposite pole,

some view the idea of treating language as a human right as erroneous since it does not account for the tensions that can rise between balancing individual and collective rights. At the individual level, the right to choose whatever language a person wants includes the right to not speak the language of the broader group that the individual is part of, thus raising the possibility of threatening the integrity of the larger group. Furthermore, because languages organically develop over time and because they can contain numerous dialects, this gives rise to the argument that they cannot and should not be treated as static units. The authors address the challenges that arise from learning and using a minority language and which may potentially deprive such speakers of what is offered in the language of the majority.

Nonetheless, the section itself seems too brief. Given the books' title and focus, the reader could expect it to be developed as the core theoretical framework for the broader discussion, or a more thorough analysis of the language/human rights dynamic. While this part summarizes the way in which language rights are codified in law and how identity is shaped by the politics of private versus public interests, it does not delve much into issues such as why conflicts determined by language divergences start in the first place, and how they evolve in the context of a multiplicity of power dynamics. As it is presented in the book, conflict is understood as emerging at the intersection of territorial possession, the composition of different human populations, and the role of politics and power. The book does, however, lay the ground for further research into such topical matters in an engaging and well-informed way.

In its third part, the book identifies five major conflict categories and details them by specific examples: 1) indigenous minorities (cases: Sámi in Norway, Ainu in Japan, American Indians in the US); 2) geopolitical minorities (cases: Hungarians in Slovakia, Hispanics in the Southwestern US, Kurds in Turkey); 3) minorities of migration (cases: Roma in Europe, Koreans in Japan, Puerto Ricans in the US); 4) intra-linguistic (dialectal) minorities (cases: Okinawans in Japan, African American English in the US); and 5) competition for linguistic dominance (cases: Flemish versus Walloons in Belgium, Tamils versus Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, French versus English in Canada). While the individual examples are very instructive and help describe the dynamics at stake, they are slightly too brief to properly unpack the similarities and differences of conflicts in countries that share comparable histories. The nuances are therefore insufficiently explored and, while the typology of the

conflicts is interesting, in-depth analysis that would explain the different outcomes is wanting.

The discussion would have benefitted from further linking parts one and two of the book with parts three and four. While the book engages in an informed and interesting way with a fascinating and underexplored topic - and while it is beautifully written - it reads like two separate manuscripts that have been merged, but which do not sufficiently address one another. For the reader who expects an in-depth analysis on why, how, and to what effect language and human rights intersect, the descriptive typological approach might deliver the feeling of an unfulfilled promise. Nevertheless, the book offers extremely valuable insights and provides a worthy starting point for further exploration.