

Unpacking the neocolonising legacies of nation states: ethnolinguistic vitality, language policy, and silenced multilingualism

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The nation state ideology, closely linked to the notion of a stable and safe monolingual 'norm', still influences and informs language policies, interethnic relationships and attitudes to multilingualism, reinforced by enduring patterns of symbolic domination (Bourdieu 1991; Heller 1995). The relatively recent emergence of modern nation states in fact established and perpetuated both the notions and legal categories of 'ethnic minorities' and 'minority languages' (Gardner-Chloros 2007: 473). Within this paradigm, ethnolinguistic diversity began to be seen as an obstacle to political unity, social cohesion and progress, while the emancipation of minority groups has been perceived and positioned as a threat, not only for the nation-state, but even for the status and purity of national languages. This process has been widespread and devastating, particularly due to the legacy of colonization and the more covert impact of re-colonization, both in former colonial territories and with regard to the numerous forms of internal or internalized colonialism salient in both postcolonial territories and in nation-states. Many forms of colonial practices and models of the modern state were transplanted into post-colonial settings, often located in linguistically and culturally diverse areas (Lo Bianco 2007: 37-38; Tamburelli & Tosco 2021).

The emphasis on language in the construction of national identities and a widely shared idea that it is possible to identify a direct and objective relationship between an ethnic group and its language as well as to draw a clear boundary around them still continue to influence policy-making, communicative practices and ways of thinking. However, given the complexity and fluidity of social identities and language practices, it is necessary to re-examine these theoretical assumptions derived from nationalism and viewing languages and social groups as bounded and homogeneous entities (Heller 2005). Many of the problems of historical and social injustices faced by speakers of contested languages result from deficient language and educational policies; such policies should be research-driven rather than perpetuating harmful ideologies and prejudices. Research and academic theories have not been free from them either. For example, since 1970s Ethnolinguistic Vitality theory has become a widely used framework for the study and prediction of language maintenance and shift. Nevertheless, the theory was formulated and applied mainly to bilingual, and more rarely multilingual, European regions, Canada and USA. This narrow geographical approach is a reflection of a broader trend in humanities and social sciences perpetuating colonial and postcolonial paradigms in research, dominated by Western academic institutions and the spectra of their interests. This is true of many disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, linguistics and even history.

As I will argue in this talk, the ELV theory along with its impact on language policy and planning are inadequate for approaching language dynamics in complex linguistic societies including many multilingual contexts of the Global North. They are even less suitable for understanding the diversity of the so-called Global South, characterized by a high degree of endogenous multilingualism, a weak institutional representation of regional and local languages,

loose associations between languages and political identity, as well as high levels of mutual tolerance for languages spoken by other individuals. In such contexts speakers' behaviors and social practices are strongly linked to their complex, multi-layered and relational identities, often drawing on different ethnic and social affiliations. Thus, the 'native speaker' representing a homogenous speech community and using a 'standard language' is a highly ideologized joint product of modern linguistics and the ethnolinguistic nationalism of European nation states. Such understandings are premised on the idea that languages are distinct and clearly defined systems acquired from birth, even if in many environments of both the global South and the global North children are exposed to more than one language or variety and determining their one 'mother tongue' is often simply impossible (Coulmas 2018: 56-57). All this has had devastating effects on language policy and language attitudes, from micro-levels of family to macro-levels of states.

In the present era, characterized by the erosion of diversity, the globally increasing endangerment of many local languages, inequalities in the distribution of language rights, growing migration, sustained ethnic-based prejudice, violence and discrimination—but also witnessing the resurgence of hidden or silenced multilingualism!—, data-driven tools and sensitive models for studying the vitalities of contested language communities and for shaping decolonised languages policies are of the utmost importance. They should have the capacity to transcend the legacy of nation-state ideologies and to better inform strategies favoring more positive inter-group relationships, sustainable multilingualism and social justice.