

REVIEW ESSAY

Talking Back: Peripheral Peoples, Fractured Identities and Marginalized Language Discourses in Education

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Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000. Linguistic Genocide in Education – or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights? Mahwah, New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (2000). pp 785. Pbk ISBN 0-8058-3468-0, £38.95.

Now and then a book is published that stands out above the rest because its contribution is both important and unique. We also know that it is a text that we will return to again and again – it will live with us. This is such a book; it is an intellectual tour de force; it interests, fascinates, disturbs and challenges us on many different levels. It combines rich description with in-depth analysis examining sociolinguistic, sociocultural and political issues from different perspectives without losing sight of the main thesis of the book. This intricately woven tapestry unravelled for, and by the reader, offering multi-faceted and multi-levelled accounts, represents a great intellect at its peak.

In writing this review essay I am acutely aware that the comprehensive scope and depth of the book make it very difficult to do justice to the complexities that it addresses. There is the risk of reducing the richness that it contains to a linear/simplistic narrative. In order to reflect some of that richness and complexity in the book I shall summarize key aspects followed by a focus on what I consider are some of the major contributions of the book as a whole. First, from a literacy point of view, I want to comment on the book's readability.

Readability

At first glance the book appears daunting with regard to volume, scope and depth. However, readers will find that the way in which the text is organized makes it easily accessible. The book is organized as a hypertext textual environment comprising a main text with standardized hyperlink formats presented as Definition Boxes, Address Boxes, Reader Task Boxes, Info Boxes and Inserts each providing not only different types of information but also involving the reader at different levels of engagement. This discursively organized text builds a rich textual tapestry comprised of information, analysis, critique, discussion, polemic, and reflection and provides multiple entrances to different levels of meaning. The overtly interactive nature of the text transforms the reader from passive consumer of information into an active producer of meanings. I found the Preface particularly helpful since it provides not only a broad overview of the book but also acquaints the reader with key issues and themes that feature throughout the book. Similarly, the detailed Contents Page (in addition to the standard) immediately preceding each chapter focuses attention on the specific issues to be discussed and also provides an index of the hyperlinks that feature in each chapter. This, alongside several indices including an author/person index, languages and peoples index, countries/state index, subject index, endnotes with every chapter as well as a bibliography of Esperanto Studies and Interlinguistics and Language Policy (prepared by Mark Fettes) in addition to the main bibliography makes the book a very valuable and easily accessible reference text.

Schematic Overview

The book is divided into three parts. Part I Setting the Scene, focuses on the state of languages in the world today. It examines the complexities that surround the relationship between language and individual and social identities as well as the process of self-identification, and the power relations in which these are embedded. Discussing the organic inter-relationship between the biological, cultural and linguistic environment it juxtaposes the threat globally to linguistic diversity with the threat to biodiversity. Part II Linguistic Genocide, State Policies, and Globalisation engages with the book's central issues. It argues that linguistic genocide is systemic; it resides within the largely assimilative practices and processes of the nation state. Critiquing the monolingual basis of the nation-state it argues that the conflict between the two principles, that is, self-determination of peoples/minorities/ethnic groups vs. the integrity of the state is based on a myth. It provides a powerful critique of economic and power disparities in the contemporary world including the North/South and centre-periphery political and economic divides and the ways in which these inequalities are reflected in language and education. It argues that cultural rights have in both human rights theory – and practice – lacked importance and received little attention despite the fact that ethnic conflict and ethnic tension are seen as the most important possible reasons for unrest, conflict and violence in the world. Part III Struggle against Linguistic Genocide and for Linguistic Human Rights in Education looks at key global defining sites such as the UN, the Council of Europe and UNESCO. It argues that despite fine declarations on the intent to promote diversity, the linguistic human rights needed for the maintenance of diversity, namely, Mother Tongue Education, were absent from international human rights instruments. Since there are no binding international covenants on linguistic rights, political rights and rights of any language reside within particular socio-historical contexts. Finally it emphasizes the need to question at grassroots level the power bases of states and international organizations and to interrogate arguments within these contexts against linguistic diversity grounded in cost-effectiveness discourses. It advocates 'a zero tolerance campaign' in which multilinguals 'stop tolerating both monolingual reductionism and subtractive diffusion of English' (p.666). And through engaging in counter-hegemonic discourse to break the culture of silence and toleration (of oppression and ignorance) – with the ultimate aim of transforming through political engagement the power relations that define and sustain social, economic and cultural inequalities.

Key Foci and Arguments

What makes this book important is its stark message first, that linguistic diversity is disappearing at a very rapid rate in the world today. Second, that linguistic human rights are central to the maintenance of linguistic diversity. Third, that schools are deeply implicated in committing linguistic genocide through educational policies supporting linguistic and cultural assimilation. Collectively these contribute to the demise of historically grounded cultural ways of knowing and ways of doing. and Fourth, that the lack of acknowledgement in development policy frameworks of the role of language in education, and particularly, the importance of mother tongue education has resulted in the consistent failure of successive mass literacy-for-development initiatives globally. Fifth, that this in turn has impacted negatively on social and economic development within developing countries. Sixth, the book provides encyclopedic knowledge and information on a wide range of issues related to linguistic diversity, linguistic human rights and linguistic genocide whilst simultaneously engaging in a multi-levelled critique of the power relations that traverse language, literacy and development discourse, policy and practice. Seventh, it emphasizes the fact that language, as a social and ideological practice, is inherently political and, therefore, embedded in power relations.

Breaking Boundaries

In my view, what makes the book unique is the all-encompassing counter-hegemonic approach that it adopts to the analysis of language in society and culture. Asking ‘Why?’ questions Skutnabb-Kangas suggests in the Introduction, helps to raise awareness of the consciously destructive power of corporatism and attempts to silence the voices of those engaged in the struggle to maintain bio-linguistic and cultural diversity. The questions that she raises here translate into major themes that are explored throughout the book. This critical approach not only breaks the boundaries that frame and insulate knowledges in separate disciplines, but more significantly, it interrogates the dominant paradigm in which knowledge about language and education is presented. The question of how language is theorized is important with regard to the worldview and, implicitly, the range of knowledges that is presented. Voloshinov argued that:

Language, discourse, that is almost the totality of life. But it must not be thought that this totalizing and multifaceted reality can be the object of a single science – linguistics, and thus be understood through linguistic methods exclusively. (Voloshinov, 1974, in Todorov, 1984:24)

Skutnabb-Kangas locates her analysis within a multi-disciplinary framework drawing on inter alia economics, history, political economy, development studies, the sociology of language, the sociology of education, sociolinguistics, cultural theory and critical discourse theory. This framework provides her with the terms of reference to engage with a broad range of issues related to language within culture and society.

Implicit in Voloshinov’s view above is that language, history and discourse inherently mark our social experiences. However, whilst our histories to a significant extent construct our identities both as individuals and as members of society, they do not suture us neatly into place within the social structure. That is to say, people are not determined in a static way within the social structure; they are actively engaged in challenging and resisting the oppressive power relations that construct their world. Skutnabb-Kangas illustrates this very powerfully by placing her own experience as a multilingual living within a society that privileges monolingual speakers as citizens having the right to participate (as voters) in the democratic process, at the centre of the discussion. Articulating her experiences as a multilingual and, moreover, in augmenting her discussions on various aspects of linguistic diversity with comments, anecdotes and reflections by individuals on their experiences as multilinguals within settings defined as monolingual, Skutnabb-Kangas gives voice to historically subjugated language and literacy narratives. In thus providing individuals with ‘cultural space’ she empowers people willing to share their experiences, to speak from the margins. Underpinning this is the Freirean view that through reflecting on and articulating our experiences we situate ourselves in relation to the historical discourses that have structured our lives, and in trying to make sense of that experience, we reconstruct ourselves in terms of that understanding. Thus Skutnabb-Kangas argues that naming oneself in relation to one’s world is a necessary pre-requisite to reclaiming cultural power.

Speaking ‘the self’ from a position of ‘disidentification’ (Pecheux, 1982), that is to say, seeking actively to work against historical forms of oppression subscribes to Giddens’ (1991: 2) view that:

The self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences; in forging their self-identities, no matter how local their specific contexts of action, individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications.

The anecdotes, poetry, and reflections offered by people from various socio-cultural and political contexts here provide glimpses of this process of self-identification. The argument is that speaking the self from the margins provides opportunity for ‘transforming those margins into the centre, changing perhaps, the notion of the centre itself’ (Berkday, 1993: 128). These meanings so central to Black feminist theories, also underscore mainstream feminist standpoint theories underpinning research from the perspective of the experience and lives of ‘people who have been disadvantaged by the dominant conceptual framework’ (Harding, 1998 quoted in Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000: xxviii). As can be seen above, Skutnabb-Kangas augments feminist standpoint theories with ‘the language of critique’ grounded in the sociology of education and the ‘language of possibility’ rooted in the tradition of liberation theology’.

Adopting this bricolage of theoretical approaches enables her to highlight the silences on social justice, the structured marginalization of politically disempowered linguistic groups, amongst others, the Deaf, Sámi and Khoe-Khoe peoples. It also allows her to bring into focus the construction of new ‘outgroups’ in educational policy discourse – and social policy attempts at assimilation, as has been the case with the Kurds living in Turkey. It also enables her to provide encyclopedic knowledge and information on linguistic diversity in the contemporary world whilst at the same time engaging in social critique. Of particular significance is her carefully considered discussion of the complexities that surround the question, definition and concept of ‘what is a language’ and ‘what is a dialect’ – emphasizing the arbitrariness of definitions and the inherently political nature of naming a language. Moreover, focusing on the unequal relations that define the terrain of linguistic diversity she argues that dominant meanings ultimately are crystallized in dictionary definitions. As such they both practically, and symbolically, name the world.

Another example is her in-depth analysis of the factors involved in cultural assimilation. Her evaluation of identities, including some of the complex issues that surround the naming of languages, of peoples and of experience raises important issues as these relate to the inherently unequal relations of colonial hegemony, and the coercive power of the state. Skutnabb-Kangas gives an account of the state’s imposition of Turkish names on the Kurdish population group living within the boundaries of the Turkish ‘nation’. To underscore this argument, another example of coercive state intervention worth mentioning is the enforced name-changes endured by ethnic Turks and Roma people in Bulgaria during successive periods in the last century as part of the state’s drive for cultural assimilation in the name of nationhood. Here the state issued a list of ‘official’ Bulgarian names from which these minority groups had to choose their new names as part of the drive for the ‘renationalization’ of the Pomaks (ethnic Slavs who had converted to Islam during the period of Ottoman rule). The ‘en masse enforced changing of names (..) within this context signified very powerfully the obliteration of both cultural and personal identity; the decimation of a people and their histories’ (Rassool and Honour, 1996:20).

This discussion also provides the opportunity to think through the inter-relatedness of the issue of diversity, and factors contributing to language death and maintenance. I found several issues of major interest. First, the hegemonic notion of terra nullius (nobody’s land, uninhabited or empty land) in colonial discourse as the rationale for the killing of peoples, cultures and languages. This is a powerful motif and it was therefore welcome to see it introduced early in the book and followed up later in an in-depth discussion of linguistic genocide and state language policies. Second, the view that all landscapes are cultural landscapes is a potent one. I found the discussion of the relationship between traditional knowledges and language ecology instructive, especially the example of the Sámi ways of naming and their description of landscapes, the traditional transmission of cultural knowledges; the making and remaking of cultural ways of life – and the role of formal schooling in their destruction. The point that the processes of language loss also ‘affect the maintenance of traditional environmental knowledge – from loss of biosystematic

lexicon to loss of traditional stories' is well made. This discussion highlights the importance of examining beyond the rhetoric the notions of local knowledges and languages in development discourse; they need to be concretized; they need to be named within their cultural landscapes – including cultural ways of knowing. Third, her discussion of the ways in which the creation of homogenized linguistic markets in formal schooling, urbanization and modernization (global and local) have historically contributed to the systematic destruction of languages, identity and cultures illustrates the subtle yet systematic processes of linguistic genocide.

Adopting a multidisciplinary framework also allows her to position language as a core cultural value and provides her with the terms of reference to analyze the concepts of cultural diversity and cultural competence as well as the ideologies underpinning assimilation and integration. She highlights the power relations that inhere in minority-majority negotiations on the survival of linguistic diversity, often resulting in cultural assimilation. She argues that the positive construction of 'Self' as the 'neutral norm' if viewed against the projection of the 'Other' as the negative 'under-developed' gives rise to the 'understanding' that in order to be accepted the 'Other' (minority language/culture) needs to be subsumed into the 'Self' (dominant language/culture). The subtle ways in which linguistic structures 'Otherness' amongst minority group children leading them to deny their linguistic heritage constitutes the hegemony of assimilationist ideology.

Another factor to be mentioned here is the concept of 'foreigner' as a powerful signifier of 'Otherness'. Featuring largely as an unproblematic, taken-for-granted descriptor of languages, cultures and people in social and academic discourse the concept, historically, has played a major role in the sublimation of cultural knowledges, languages and literacies on an individual level within minority group cultures, in favour of dominant definitions. In order to illustrate this, Skutnabb-Kangas draws on experiences of people in the USA to highlight the different pressures on some immigrants to change their names as a prerequisite of belonging to the dominant group within the country of adoption. Other contemporary examples include the widespread pressures for workers employed by Western transnational companies located within, for example, the Far East to adopt a Western (Christian) name. This is also the case in the West where students/workers from Asia and Africa often end up with 'diglossic' naming which means having a name for the work/study context, and the original ethnic name for the domestic and ethno-cultural domain. In many of these cases students/workers themselves have changed their names because they felt that tutors/bosses and their fellow students/workers might have difficulty pronouncing their ethnic names because they are too 'foreign'. These are the hegemonic ways in which notions of cultural superiority operate to construct dominant versions of 'reality'. These self-negating actions confirm Hall's (1993:394) view that they (the colonizing/imperialist West) have 'the power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'Other'. Within this discourse framework ethnic/linguistic differences become conflated with 'outsider'/'alien-ness'. These processes as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1993) and Hall (1993) argue represent the essence of colonial hegemonic consciousness. The 'Us-Them-Other' nexus has been the success of neo-colonial and neo-imperialist cultural hegemony.

She similarly engages with the complexities that surround the concept of 'ethnicity' including self-definition as well as external definitions that decide the degree of self-determination allowed to minority groups. She draws on Salih's (1996:17, quoted on p.432) perspective that 'ethnicity is a social construct based on a cluster of cultural factors, language being the most common, and that its primary function is the assertion of a group's distinctive identity'. I wholeheartedly agree that the right of people to decide their ethnicity is indisputable. Similarly, the roles of states in violating the human rights of peoples by refusing to accept their self-identification as well as the stigmatization of immigrant groups across the generations identify the unequal power relations

that define the experiences of ethnic minority groups. At the same time, however, history has shown us that the concept of ethnicity is also open to political manipulation as was evident in the classification and re-classification of Chinese and Japanese as 'Honorary' Whites, and the classification of the progeny of Asian-White/ Indian-Black/ Indian-'Coloured' as 'Other Coloured' for politico-ideological ends in Apartheid South Africa. Here a rather arbitrary notion of ethnicity provided the ideological rationale for racist classification, which in turn provided the basis of unequal distribution of resources and political power. Moreover, as was recently the case in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda/ Burundi ethnic nationalism also represents a potent form of racism that has provided the ideological rationale for the decimation of large sections of the populace defined as the 'Other', the 'enemy within'. As such ethnicity can be viewed also as a social construct that has to be seen in relation to the political context from which it derives its meaning.

Skutnabb-Kangas also engages at meta-level with the power/knowledge discourses that traverse the language and education policy framework. She shows how power is exercised through language and discourse to construct 'knowledges' around the identity, rights and experiences of, inter alia, linguistic minority groups, 'peripheral peoples', and borrowing Hannah Arendt's term, the 'social pariahs' (Arendt, 1978) within the nation state. She also shows how language and discourse construct 'knowledges' around the quality and relative value of the languages spoken by these groups of people in relation to other, economically and politically more powerful languages. The construction of 'knowledges' here refers to the Foucauldian sense of discourse as:

a group of statements which provide a language for talking about - a way of representing the knowledge about - a particular topic at a particular historical moment ...the production of knowledge through language (Hall, 1992: 291)

Within the global cultural economy linguistic minority groups, the 'peripheral peoples', and 'social pariahs' of the modern world can be seen as living 'border lives', in between cultures, and are positioned generally at the margins of different societies. However, Skutnabb-Kangas illustrates that these terms of description also represent cultural metaphors for what could be termed the "situated 'Other'", who could be seen as comprising settled individuals or groups, whose identities have been defined historically in relation to established socio-cultural 'norms' within the nation-state. These identities are classified generally according to normative binaries such as, majority/minority; able/disabled; male/female; white/black; indigenous/immigrant groups and their inclusion/exclusion in mainstream society.

Emphasizing the power of assimilation that inheres in monolingual frameworks Skutnabb-Kangas highlights the hierarchical classification of languages/dialects/ patois/vernacular and the concomitant negative labeling of speakers of minority languages. Of particular interest are the negative, deficit-oriented connotations attached to the labeling of immigrant children as NEP-children (No English Proficiency), LEP-children (Limited English Proficiency), LOTE speakers (Languages Other than English), or NESB children (Non-English Speaking Background). These classifications often provide the justification for labeling; for constructing 'Otherness'; for the allocation of fewer resources. Thus she argues that the 'linguistic and cultural capital embodied in the languages and cultures of the dominated, are invalidated through the stigmatisation process' (p. 405). Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of linguistic markets she argues that the stigmatization of minority languages and cultures as non-resources leaves minority children without a starting capital at the outset. She states that:

Their resources (and the minorities/dominated groups themselves) are socially constructed as Other, and treated as handicaps, deficiencies, rather than resources, as something to get rid of

rather than to cherish. They are constructed as invisible non-resources which through this invalidation become non-convertible to other resources and to positions of structural power. (p.406)

Within the dominant monolingual paradigm children of minorities/dominated groups tend to lose out as their parents cannot give them much convertible 'starting capital' within the formal educational system. Similarly she argues that within the globalization discourse the poor are constructed as being structurally poor and unemployed because of their own inherent characteristics/deficiencies.

Thus Skutnabb-Kangas has shown the imperative for systemic processes of exclusion and, de facto, the erasure of personal and minority group narratives to be subjected to critical analysis. Within her counter-hegemonic discourse she has shown the importance of the need to take account of the dialogical relationship that exists between identity formation and sociocultural and political processes of subjectification, subordination, peripheralization and exclusion. She has also laid bare the mechanisms by which boundaries of social difference are produced, how they legitimize different forms of exclusion, and the ways in which they relate to societal power (Hussain, 2000). By interrogating the dominant paradigm in this way, Skutnabb-Kangas has managed to fracture its universalistic truth claims and to disrupt, or at least, disturb its apparent stability. As hooks (1989:9) argues:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back', that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice.

Within an increasingly uncertain and morally, politically and ethically ambiguous world in which language has become commodified and the structured 'truths' of the 'consciousness industry' define social discourse, this counter-hegemonic voice is critical.

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