INTERCULTURALISM, NATIONALISM AND LANGUAGE IN QUÉBEC: A CRITICAL SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The author explores how social difference and its parameters of inclusion/exclusion that orient identity and belonging to the nation-state are constructed in Québec intercultural discourse, particularly under the dynamic conditions of late modernity and globalization. In highlighting the paucity of diverse critical approaches to language and nation in the current body of literature on interculturalism in Québec, this paper makes a case for why critical sociolinguistic approaches have an integral role to play in scholarly debate about diversity and integration in the Canadian context.

INTRODUCTION

Language has always served as a key terrain across which processes of social organization, identification with and orientation to the nation in Canada have been structured. Over the last 40 years, we have witnessed the development of two dominant visions in response to the tensions that language and ethno-cultural diversity present for the modern Canadian nation-state: multiculturalism and, more recently, Québec's interculturalism. Complex debates about language and its relationship to culture and identity have been at the heart of the principal normative (and, to some extent, the statistical or empirical) debates about the differences and similarities between these two ideologies.

Drawing on critical approaches to linguistic and social theory, this paper will explore how social difference and its attending parameters of inclusion/exclusion that orient identity and belonging to the nation-state are constructed in Québec intercultural discourse, particularly under the dynamic conditions of late modernity (Giddens, 1991) and globalization. Within the limited scope of this article, I will consider how certain norms and beliefs about language are or are not represented in discourses of Québec interculturalism, and what they reveal about contextualized patterns of nation building in the Canadian context. This paper submits that critical sociolinguistic approaches have an integral role to play in scholarly debate about diversity and integration in the Canadian context.

NORMALIZING NATIONAL DISCOURSES: THE RISE OF INTERCULTURALISM IN QUÉBEC

While national discourses are always necessarily in flux, Canadian multiculturalism has been normalized to a significant extent through the machinations of intellectual production over the last 40 years or so. Québec interculturalism, on the other hand, has only recently shifted onto center-stage in academic discussion, and the processes of conventionalizing it as a national discourse in Québec are relatively new. This, then, is an important time to turn our attention there. Where is this discourse coming from? How does it construct who is Québécois(e) and how to perform Québécitude? Given that it is not officially codified in law, who is perceived to own, regulate or safeguard the ideology?

While interculturalism in Québec has been loosely explored as a model of social integration from a range of perspectives since the 1970s, its recent proliferation in scholarly literature found impetus in the 2007-2008 Commission on Reasonable Accommodation headed by Charles Taylor and Gérard Bouchard. It is not insignificant that Bouchard has established himself as one of the key producers of intercultural discourse in Québec through extensive publications and public lectures on the subject, as well as through his role as the Chair of the *International Symposium on Interculturalism* held in Montreal in May of 2011.

A growing body of social science literature, notably in the fields of sociology and political science, has contributed to the development of intercultural discourse. Much attention has been paid to how interculturalism should be defined (Bouchard, 2011; Rocher, Labelle, Field & Icart, 2008) and considering its viability as an 'alternative' model of integration designed to manage the challenges that diversity presents for majority/minority relations, religion, language, culture, nation and state in the Québec context, particularly in relation to Canadian multiculturalism (Baril, 2008; McAndrew, 2007; Labelle, 2008; Rocher & Labelle, 2010). This new wave of research has been successful in refining a previously imprecise approach to immigration, social cohesion and cultural pluralism. Yet there exists a paucity of empirically based sociological research that pushes beyond normative approaches to critically explore why particular configurations of interculturalism have gained traction in Québec and why now, through what kind of ontological perspectives, what kind of significance they have and for whom.

Why should this matter? While discourses of nation in Québec have morphed conceptually over time (from "traditionalist" to "modern" to emergent "pluralist" or "globalizing") in response to various political, social and economic conditions (Heller and Labrie, 2003), certain patterns of social organization and boundaries of belonging between the 'nous et eux' have arguably been reproduced at every stage by the dominant stakeholders of the national project. It is important to remember that the dominant majority who make up what Blad and Couton (2009) have called "the nation-bearing Francophone Québecers" remain the dominant ethnic group in this context. As Juteau writes, when "ethnicity is only superficially discarded, […] it remains operative on the ground level, as part and parcel of hierarchical social relations" (Juteau, 2004, p. 96).

This should prompt us to ask whether or not Québec interculturalism fits within – or ruptures – contextualized patterns of nation-building.

Gauging from the literature, dominant normative expressions of interculturalism in Québec appear to be consistent (from varying perspectives and across a spectrum of time and space) in their recognition of and commitment to pluralism and democracy, but also in the assertion that Québec is a distinct nation, that the French language is the key defining feature or 'site of convergence' for this nation, and that the Francophone majority must be respected as the dominant culture into which all other groups must integrate (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008; Baril, 2008; Bouchard, 2011 & 2010; Gagnon, 2000; Labelle, 2008 & 2000; Labelle, Rocher & Rocher, 1995). From a critical perspective, this begs some contextualization: why has this particular configuration of interculturalism gained broader currency in Québec and why now?

Scant attention has been paid to the fact that the rise of Québec interculturalism comes at a time when rapidly changing social and economic conditions brought about by globalization have issued a direct challenge to the modernist idea that nations are impermeable, homogenous social and political units tethered exclusively to one language (Heller, 2010). Thus we may reasonably ask: why the investment in a model of social organization that insists first and foremost upon language as the nodal point around which a national identity and sense of belonging must collect?

LANGUAGE, MODERNITY AND NATION IN QUÉBEC

Québec's situation within these broader global challenges must be understood within the historical and political context of its complex colonial past and its internal struggles to reconcile a Francophone population that self-identifies as both the majority, dominant culture in the territory of Québec and as a minority culture in the broader predominantly Anglophone Canadian nation-state (operationalized under the rubric of multiculturalism) and the larger North American continent.

It helps to look at how language came to be the central marker of the Québec nation and the medium through which ideas about the nation-state are legitimized. Language did not emerge as an axis of nationalism until around the 19th century (Baumann & Briggs, 2003; Hobsbawm, 1990). With the passage of modernity, language became an important medium through which people could be described and standardized. Uniform languages became associated with specific territories and populations, making them easier to control. A shared language enabled the construction of social unity across perceptions of shared values, behaviors and beliefs (Heller, 2006).

Prior to the 1960s, French Canadian identity was not defined by territorial parameters but along ideological and social lines *(la foi, la race, la langue).* At the moment when Québec adopted a statist orientation to nation building during the Quiet Revolution, processes of secularization began and the French language became the central tool in the political mobilization of the Francophone majority in Québec, and the key symbol of its national legitimacy (Heller, 2007). Heller and Labrie (2003) have explored this shifting discourse as a conscious move by Francophone elites in their efforts to envision a source of power other than the Catholic Church in Québec. An emphasis on language bridged the traditionalist and modernist discourses of nation, creating a sense of continuity and

coherence. Language was mobilized because it was perceived as a more palatable symbol of identity and belonging within the new modern national discourse built around civic ideas and democratic principles (i.e., anyone can learn a language and it is not as 'fixed' as race or religion, etc.). This strategy would not have worked for a pan-French Canadian population because they represented only a quarter of the Canadian population. The province of Québec – a conceptually bounded territory where Francophones made up 85% of the population – made the most sense strategically.

RE-IMAGINING LANGUAGE AND THE NATION

There are powerful imaginings at work in the manufacturing of the Québec nation, as there are with any national project. To construct a nation as a natural thing characterized by its 'own' language and culture requires agents to build, among other things, national discourses. Scholarly literature on interculturalism then must reflect a deeper engagement with the social engineering at the core of national projects in the contemporary Canadian-Québec context as they unfold under conditions of late-modernity and globalization, particularly across the field of language which has been largely under-theorized in the pertinent literature. Critical approaches to social and linguistic theory have a role to play in this debate because they help to break down unchallenged assumptions of language as a neutral concept. In this frame, we can understand language as a terrain upon which we can interpret struggles over power or competing claims to protected resources, capital and categories of identity and belonging (Bourdieu, 1982; Heller, 2010).

Normative, standardized ideas about the French language and its role in constructing a 'culture of convergence' based on fixed ideas of Québécitude are being challenged by new forms of code-switching practices, cultural expression and accents and the different kinds of bodies, values and histories that produce and circulate them (see Sarkar, 2008). Demographic research and empirical data suggest that French itself is not in danger of disappearing in Québec, noting that the use of French among Anglophones and Allophones is steadily on the rise (Lamarre & Pagé, 2010). However, bi- and multilingualism are an increasing reality in Québec, particularly in the region of Montreal where 75% of immigrants to the province reside. Québec is also facing a large demographic shift vis-à-vis its aging population and low birthrate among 'old stock' Francophones of French European origin and high rates of immigration to balance this dwindling population. As evidenced during the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, increasing diversity and corresponding demands for recognition or accommodation by ethno-linguistic, ethno-cultural and minority groups has pushed many people (variously situated) to think about what identity and belonging to the Québec nation-state mean within the parameters of modernity and liberal democracy.

CONCLUSION

In the wake of the *International Symposium on Interculturalism* in Montreal, Annick Germain bluntly questioned whether or not Québec interculturalism is simply a means of reassuring the Caucasian Francophone majority (Germain, 2011). Her critique is provocative because it exposes the tensions over language and ethno-cultural diversity that the discourse is arguably constructed to 'manage'. To my knowledge, her question received no direct scholarly engagement, at least in published form. It is also notable that earlier critiques of the structural inequality along lines of language and culture in "institutional research" on interculturalism and multiculturalism in Québec, together with appeals for more "oppositional research" in these fields also do not appear to have been incorporated into contemporary debate in the social science literature in Québec (see Belhachmi, 1997). Conspicuous by its absence in the literature is active and reciprocal intellectual debate between the dominant Francophone majority (the main producers of intercultural discourse in Québec) and Aboriginal scholars and Québec scholars of varied socio-linguistic and ethno-cultural backgrounds. This is important because as a producer of intercultural discourse myself, I am conscious of how historical and socially situated subjectivities influence how we perceive and are perceived by others and how we mutually and discursively position each other. These things influence not only the shape and contours of our research, but also our own ontological assumptions about what it means to identify with or belong to Québec and broader Canadian societies through the prism of dominant normative expressions of interculturalism.

As Québec society stands at the cusp of being re-defined by massive generational shifts, and the processes of immigration and globalization that will shape the 21st century, it is one thing to highlight the paucity of diverse critical approaches to language and nation in the current body of literature on interculturalism. My hope is that the discussion moving forward will pivot bravely on why these things still matter in the Canadian context.

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