Language Rights

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Many liberals endorse an ideal of neutrality for the state when it comes to its relations with people of distinct identities. One model in the United States has been a certain understanding of the First Amendment, with its careful balancing of free exercise, on the one hand, and nonestablishment, on the other. In recent work I have defended such a liberal conception, which I call "neutrality as equal respect." The basic idea is simple: state acts shouldn't disadvantage individuals because of their identities. This notion of neutrality might help flesh out what happens when we try to generalize the First Amendment paradigm from religious groups to identity groups *more generally*. One obvious test for such an analysis is to ask what help it offers us in thinking about how liberal states should treat language minorities.[1]

"Policies aimed at survival actively seek to create members of the community, for instance, in their assuring that future generations continue to identify as French-speakers," Charles Taylor writes, reflecting on the language policies of Quebec (58–59). And he insists that the desire for survival is not simply a desire that the social forms that give meaning to the lives of existing individuals should continue for them: it also requires the continuation of a way of life through "indefinite future generations" (59). Yet, though the desire that an identity shall be maintained is not a negligible one, it has to be conditioned and contoured by other considerations, including the requirements of participation in a larger polity. A politics of recognition, in short, must be buffered by a recognition of politics.

If we are reluctant to accept, as a rationale for Quebec's language policy, an overriding value of survival, how else might one negotiate the issue of language politics raised by multilingual societies? Let me sketch a way to think about language and schooling in this context, putting to one side the merits of the actual practice that Taylor was interpreting. (Here, as always, I'm happy to put myself in the position of the proverbial philosopher who demands, "That's all very well in practice, but will it work in theory?") Citizenship, we can agree, is one of the primary means for the making of lives in the modern world. The exercise of citizenship requires the capacity to participate in the public discussion of the polity, and so a language is one of the instruments of citizenship. We can call this the political language. Some states may elect to try to manage more than one political language, and this brings complications, to which I will return. But let me pursue the issue first in terms of a single political language.

Public education should aim to give the political language to all citizens—and where private education is permitted, mastery of the political language must be one of its elements, for the sake of the child, who will become a citizen. Such mastery is consistent with being taught in another language and with learning yet other languages still. Our real concern here is what languages the school's students end up knowing.

Language minorities have an interest in their children's mastery of the political language; but typically they also have a concern, rooted in the connection between language and identity, that their children should mas-

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ter their "own" language too. The availability of the minority language is to a great degree a condition for the exercise of one possible identity option—namely, to live a life in which one's experience as a member of the group is shaped, interpreted, mediated by *its* language. This means that children of the minority group for whom this option is to remain open must acquire their language, which might best be accomplished as part of their schooling; and, provided they are also learning the political language, they can thus retain the option without being trapped in a minority identity. So in a country with language minorities, the state should make such options available to parents and children who seek them, if it can. I say "if it can" because there are resource issues involved in such provision and trade-offs to be made among many competing desiderata. If the group is very small or the costs would be very high, the state may leave it to the group to sustain the language. The crucial point is that there is a legitimate identity-derived interest here in maintaining the language—the sort of interest that a state that cares for its citizens will certainly bear in mind.

It is then, in my view, right for a state, like Quebec, to insist that all its schools produce competence in the political language. This means that the right of anglophone parents in Quebec to send their children to English-medium schools is only reasonable if those schools also teach the political language, French; and, equally, in francophone schools, anglophone children (like speakers of other minority languages) should be able—within the limits set by resource constraints—to gain literate mastery of their own language as well.

The complication, of course, is that Quebec is not an independent sovereign but a province of Canada. That nation has not one but two political languages. As citizens of the Canadian state (and not just of Quebec), Francophones are entitled to access to its political language. The question then is whether, in states that are officially multilingual, speakers of one of the languages need fluency in the others to achieve equal citizenship. The history of Switzerland suggests that, as an empirical matter, this is not necessary, and in South Africa, for example, with eleven political languages, it would not even be possible. The answer will depend on many historical contingencies (such as what degree of trust between communities exists in view of their past relations) and on questions of political structure (such as the degree to which there is—as in Canada, Belgium, or Switzerland—a decentralized politics of regions with different political languages).

And so, whatever the practical merits or difficulties of the current political resolution of this issue in Quebec, the way that it has been *conceptualized,* through a politics of recognition, gets things exactly the wrong way around. Taylor says, with approval, that "restrictions have been placed on Quebeckers by their government, in the name of the collective goal of survival" (53). But the right issue in deciding the primary language of instruction in state schools is not the maintenance of a francophone ethnic identity—not *survivance*—but equality of citizenship in a francophone state. Under Quebec law, "le français est la langue officielle du Québec." Once a democratic process has made French the political language, access to French is the right of all citizens and so must be made available to them; access to minority languages is a central-enough interest that children of minority communities should be able to learn their languages as well. (And a wise and cosmopolitan community will also encourage children to learn languages that are not, in this sense, theirs.)

Survivance is aided by the choice of French as the political language, of course; that is part of why it was democratically chosen as the political language. Such an aim is a perfectly acceptable consideration in democratic politics. But such aims must be managed within the framework of equal citizenship and a concern for the personal autonomy of citizens, not by notions of compulsory identities. Allowing for

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the existence of a minority without proper access to the political language offends against equality; placing obstacles in the way of learning other languages offends against autonomy.

If English were the sole political language of Canada, Quebecers would clearly have a right to be taught it. But it isn't; and, given that the country is bilingual, so long as monolinguals can exercise full citizenship—a question that, by its nature, does not admit of resolutions with sharp boundaries—there is no obvious reason why Quebecois children whose parents don't want them to learn English should be forced to do so. They will have wider opportunities if they learn English; they might have even wider ones if they learn Chinese, Hindi, or Spanish. So long as it is unnecessary to learn English for adequate political participation, expanded opportunity will be no more reason to force English on them than Chinese. If Quebec officials would be wrong to allow anglophone children to escape French altogether, they would also be wrong to discourage a child from learning English in order to deprive him or her of an anglophone identity. Where people can acquire an identity by learning a language and they wish to do so, it is not the state's business to stop them.

The general point is this: there are two ways to bring full citizenship to the members of a minority-language community. One is to make their language one of the political languages and to issue official communications in it. (Here you want to be sure that the practicalities of this process will produce real equality of political participation.) The other way is to teach them the political language, while allowing them, if they choose, to maintain their own, which is the route that has been followed in India and the multilingual countries of Africa. The Canadian case makes clear that where political participation is layered and the different levels have different political languages, these principles may lead to complex outcomes. Given the enormously variegated patterns in which languages are distributed across states, however, any solution is going to be complex.

The politics of language is a central and difficult issue in the management of many modern multilingual states, like the United States, states whose plurality of languages results from histories of migration, voluntary and involuntary, and of conquest. I hope I've indicated a plausible way to frame this issue. But if what I have said about Quebec is wrong, I hope it is wrong because I have misunderstood the political history or the facts on the ground. What I am committed to is not the policy I have gestured toward, with all its factual predicates, but rather the claims about the way in which considerations of language as a material for identity and as a tool of citizenship should be brought to bear in constructing a policy. My aim was to show how identities give individuals complex interests that ethics—and, therefore, a satisfactory politics—must bear in mind.

Note

1. There is an immense scholarly literature on the politics of language and language policy, but nobody interested in the subject should ignore the empirically and analytically impressive studies of the political scientist David D. Laitin (*Identity*; *Language Repertoires*; *Politics*). This brief discussion follows closely that of chapter 3 of my book *The Ethics of Identity*.

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