

Rights to Language

Equity, Power, and Education

Celebrating the 60th Birthday of Tove Skutnabb-
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Which Contacts Breed Conflicts?

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During the last half century a formidable amount of scholarly research into language contact has been accumulated and we now know a great deal more about the social and linguistic aspects of bilingualism and bilingual speakers than our predecessors. Yet several puzzles remain. For instance, although one of the best studied areas is lexical borrowing, we do not yet know why it occurs in one community and not in a totally similar other community. As Sarah G. Thomason pointed out in a lecture,¹ the speakers of the Native American Salish language which she studies do not seem to have borrowed a single English loanword - they have coined their own word even for *automobile*. Most non-English-speaking peoples in the USA have borrowed *automobile*, but the Salish have not. In what follows I will attempt to tease out another mystery: why some language contacts breed social conflicts but others do not.

Language, education, and human rights are interwoven in multiple and intricate ways but the exact nature of the interaction among these fields in various societies today is not yet sufficiently understood. In the last decade or so a fourth factor, minority rights, has reemerged as a focus of international politics as well.

According to Peter Nelde's hypothesis, language contact breeds language conflict, or more precisely, social conflict, because 'In essence, conflicts cannot occur between languages, they only occur between the speakers of those languages. Thus, the idea of language conflict is a misnomer' (Baker & Jones, 1998, 334). But not all contacts breed conflicts. For instance, Dutch speakers in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have lived without conflicts (de Bot, 1997), or the autochthonous Hungarians in Austria have no conflicts today. Other autochthonous Hungarians, those in Transylvania, Rumania had a tragic conflict in March 1990, when interethnic violence erupted over the issue of Hungarian-language schools in Tirgu Mures/Marosvásárhely. The violence, which left at least six dead, was sparked off by a shopkeeper putting up a notice ('Chemist') in Hungarian.

¹ The lecture was titled 'Contact-induced typological change' and was delivered at the Linguistics Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, 1 March, 1999.

In what follows I will propose a tentative taxonomy of contact situations with an attempt to predict where conflicts are likely to occur and where they are not.

Let us start with the fundamental difference between autochthonous minorities and immigrant minorities, and some consequences which are often said to follow from this difference (Table 1).

Table 1. A basic distinction

<i>Historical status</i>	Autochthonous minority	Immigrant minority
<i>Citizenship</i>	given	to be obtained
<i>Educational goals</i>	maintenance of language and culture	transitional education
<i>Legal status and language rights</i>	more	less

One example to illustrate these differences is the autochthonous Mexicans in today's New Mexico and the recent undocumented Mexican immigrants in California. The former were conquered in their own land by Americans in 1848, and as such fit the left-hand column of Table 1. The latter fit the right-hand column. In much of the current discourse on English Only in the United States, immigrant minorities are the focus of almost all discussion while autochthonous minorities often tend to be hushed up as if they didn't even exist. Another well-known example is the Swedish-speaking Finns in Finland, who have excellent legal protection, and the Finnish-speaking immigrants (labor migrants) in Sweden, who have almost no linguistic rights (see Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996). But the historical status of minorities is not enough to explain or predict conflicts: they may or may not occur with autochthonous and immigrant minorities alike. I propose that it is the goals of educational and economic-structural policies, combined with the historical status, which may offer better predictions.

Bilingual educational programs have various linguistic goals (dominance in L1, dominance in L2, bilingualism) and societal goals such as apartheid, repatriation, equity and integration, perpetuation of social stratification, assimilation, and linguistic and cultural enrichment (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1990a, 18). As Skutnabb-Kangas (1977) suggested earlier, there are two main aspects of acculturation: *cultural* and *economic-structural incorporation*. She says (1977, 191-2):

Certain immigrant and minority groups may wish to assimilate culturally in the mainstream society, to give up their distinctive cultural features, their language and religion, but in general *minorities do not want cultural assimilation*. On the other hand, most groups want access to goods and services [...] In particular, if emphasis is laid on social security, economic and occupational life, political participation and opportunities for a good education for the children on an equal basis with the majority, most *minorities want structural incorporation*.

The goals of communities and educational and economic-structural policy-makers in multiethnic and multilingual states can be many. One way to categorize them is into the goals of the (policy-makers of the) majority nation vs. those of the minority or minorities. Line 3 of Table 1 then needs refinement, possibly along the lines of Table 2:

Table 2. The cultural-educational and economic-structural goals of majority and minority communities for autochthonous and immigrant minorities.

Autochthonous minorities	Immigrant minorities
<i>Majority goals</i>	
a) maintain (for Swedish-speakers in Finland)	a) maintain ?
b) assimilate (for Hungarians in Slovakia)	b) assimilate (for Cuban-Americans in Florida)
<i>Minority goals</i>	
a) maintain (Hungarians in Slovakia)	a) maintain (Cuban-Americans in Florida)
b) assimilate (Hungarians in Austria)	b) assimilate (Hungarian-Americans)

Among the states with autochthonous minorities, in Finland the Swedish-speaking minority can carry out maintenance policy in agreement with the Finnish-speaking majority (see Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994, 80). On the other hand, the goal of Slovaks in Slovakia, at least until the fall of Vladimír Mečiar's government in 1998, was to assimilate the Hungarian minority in that country (see Kontra, 1995/1996).

The minorities' goals can also be of two kinds: for instance, the Hungarian minority in Slovakia aims to maintain their language and culture, whereas it could be claimed with considerable certainty that the autochthonous Hungarians' goal in Burgenland, Austria is to assimilate to the majority German-speaking population (see Gal, 1979).

The question arises why Hungarians in Slovakia differ from those in Austria. I propose that the difference lies in the balance between the educational-cultural goal and the economic-structural goal of a community. In Burgenland, Austria, after World War II, the economic benefits of incorporation into the dominant Austrian society far outweighed the gains of maintaining the Hungarian language. For instance, Gal (1978) described how Hungarian peasant men could not get Hungarian wives, because Hungarian women would rather marry German-speaking men since they were placed much higher on the socioeconomic ladder than the Hungarian subsistence farmers. However, in communist and postcommunist

Slovakia, the economic benefits of incorporation have been much smaller, consequently the gap between the benefits of cultural-linguistic maintenance versus economic-structural incorporation is also much smaller. This is shown, for instance, by the fact that currently about 80% of Hungarian children go to Hungarian-language schools, despite the social and economic disadvantages which result from education through the medium of a minority language in Slovakia.

As regards states with immigrant minorities, I have yet to find a convincing example of a state where the majority population's goal is to maintain the immigrants' language and culture (if they are different from those of the majority). However, there are many examples of majorities whose aim is to assimilate immigrant minorities; the textbook example of such a country is the United States, where non-Hispanic whites aim to assimilate immigrants. As for the minorities' goals, it can be claimed that the Cuban-Americans' goal in Florida is to maintain their language and culture (see, e.g., Castro, 1992), whereas the goal of the Hungarian-Americans is, by and large, linguistic and social assimilation to mainstream America.

The difference between Cuban-Americans and Hungarian-Americans seems to be similar to that between Hungarians in Slovakia and those in Austria. Cuban-Americans in Florida are economically successful and as such can maintain their language and culture (Castro, 1992). The old-timer Hungarian-Americans, the ones who immigrated between about 1880 and 1925, were economically rather unsuccessful and, consequently, their children and grandchildren were happy to move out of the poor industrial neighborhoods where Hungarian was still spoken. They moved into a more affluent but English-speaking America.

I must admit that the short explanations of the above examples are selective and do not do justice to the multicausality involved in each case. Nevertheless, I would venture the following generalization: Conflicts occur when the majority population's aims clash with those of the minority. We would anticipate little conflict between majority Finns and minority Swedish-speakers in Finland, between German-speaking Austrians and autochthonous Hungarians in Austria, or non-Hispanic whites and Hungarian-Americans in the USA. But severe interethnic conflict can be anticipated between the Slovak majority and the Hungarian minority in Slovakia², or perhaps the Cuban-Americans and the non-Hispanic white English-speakers in Florida.

One of the most important battlegrounds where such conflicts are played out is education or language-in-education rights, a research field whose vital importance in social conflict prevention has been championed by Tove Skutnabb-Kangas.

² In September 1998 a new Slovak government came to power. How it will change the Slovak-Hungarian conflict in Slovakia remains to be seen. As of this writing in April 1999, there are signs of improvement.