

BOOK REVIEWS

Language in Society 43 (2014)
doi:10.1017/S0047404514000232

VANESSA PUPAVAC, *Language rights: From free speech to linguistic governance*.
London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp. x, 317. Hb. £60.

Reviewed by YAEL PELED
Centre for Research on Ethics (CREUM)
University of Montreal
Montréal, Québec H3T 1J7,
Canada

Department of Philosophy
McGill University
855 Sherbrooke St. West
Montréal, Québec H3A 2J7,
Canada

Faculty of Law
McGill University
3644 Peel Street
Montréal, Québec H3A 1W9,
Canada
yael.peled@mcgill.ca

Language Rights: From Free Speech to Linguistic Governance is the latest addition to a growing body of literature that focuses its attention on the notion of language rights, such as May's *Language and minority rights: Ethnicity, nationalism and the politics of language* (2001), Kymlicka & Patten's *Language rights and political theory* (2003), Freeland & Patrick's *Language rights and language survival* (2004), and Wee's *Language without rights* (2010) (see also Whiteley 2003; Pavlenko 2011; Peled 2011). The common theme that unites these works with this recent addition is a dedicated interest in a rights-based approach to the analysis of contemporary linguistic tensions and conflicts around the world. This dedicated interest reflects the prominence of the language of rights in contemporary moral, legal, and political debates, surrounding topics such as individual and group identity, self-determination, and sovereignty in a globalizing world.

At the same time, the book does not merely follow in the footsteps of its predecessors, in either theoretical, conceptual, or methodological terms. Pupavac's project is markedly distinct in its reconceptualization of language rights through the prism of freedom of speech and expressivity. The book's main interest is therefore not so much in a critical analysis of the language of language rights when applied to particular national contexts, as it is the general threat it identifies to

free speech, creativity, and expressivity from the juridication of language practices in international governance. The juridication of language through an increasingly expanding framework of global expert governance embedded in the linguistic human-rights literature, it is argued, circumscribes sovereign politics through international law. It therefore uses language rights as a case study for exploring a broader and powerful thesis on the shifting balance from political sovereignty to international governance. Pupavac's primary interest in free speech and expressivity as a key to the notion of language rights, and the identity of its regulators, is an unconventional angle on the emerging debate, and is inarguably the book's main original contribution to it.

In accordance with the main argument that "language rights are shifting from freedoms of speech to linguistic governance" (3), the book begins with an introductory chapter contesting prevailing conceptions of language, law, and human rights, particularly in regards to the enforcement of human rights-based regimes. The second chapter traces the emergence of the linguistic human rights framework, and its subsequent transition from endorsing first-generation rights (civil and political rights, including the freedom of speech) to further incorporating second- (economic, social, and cultural) and third-generation rights (a broader spectrum of rights including collective rights, self-determination, healthy environment), effectively prioritizing law over politics. Chs. 3 and 4 explore the dual root of the politics of language rights, tracing them back to the enlightenment and romantic debates over the communicative and expressive functions of language, contrasting them with contemporary language rights' skepticism towards human subjectivity, creativity, and agency. The background setting is completed with Ch. 5, which discusses a similar shift in translation theories from linguistic creativity to a limited and violent portrayal of translation, ironically reaffirming nationalist conceptions of linguistic purity despite their radical perception.

Chs. 6 through 10 form the book's main critique of the application of the human rights framework to contemporary language tensions and conflicts. The chapters, while distinct in their content and contexts (e.g. postcolonialism, ecolinguistics, hate speech regulation), are structurally linked by a common theme identifying intrinsic tensions. Ch. 6 explores the linguistic imperialism literature and its romantic critique of modernity, as expressed by its advancement of sustainable development policies. Such policies, however, are characterized as incompatible with the comprehensive state provisions necessitated for minority-language protection. Ch. 7 discusses the politics of language and language rights from the perspective of post-colonial nation building, and the ongoing tension between aspirations for progressive language planning with the prevailing dominance of former colonial languages. Ch. 8 applies the book's main thesis, on the problematic transition from sovereign politics to global governance, to the language politics of the Social Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the successor state of Bosnia. Ch. 9 explores the departure of contemporary ecolinguistics from earlier romantic conceptions of language, attributing it to its skepticism towards human moral subjectivity and linguistic creativity.

Ch. 10, along with the afterword, constitutes the book's main interest in the constraining of free speech by the growing dominance of the language rights paradigm. Ch. 10 critiques the regulation of hate speech and creation of speech codes as an unjustified offense-based constraining of the freedom of speech, pointing out the incommensurability between protecting linguistic minorities' right for free speech embedded in language rights, and the silencing of oppositional views. It likewise points out that the constraining of free speech by hate speech legislation and similar speech codes, while seen as a way of protecting minorities, may well be used to suppress their oppositional voices, as less powerful political actors. Considering speech regulation by terrorism legislation, Pupavac argues that "hate speech and language rights advocacy, treating individuals as vulnerable, and speech as violence, lend themselves to terrorism legislation, criminalising speech and expression" (239).

The concluding afterword considers the unfolding events of the Arab Spring as not only challenging "repressive state regimes, but also as antithetical to global and regional governance and their assumptions of a rather degraded humanity" (252). It similarly proposes that "both human rights interventionists and Occupy's speech governance show ambivalence towards humanity as subjects capable of political and personal self-determination" (252).

One of the main noteworthy features of the books is its density. Pupavac moves through historical periods (seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment to twenty-first-century real politics), geographical contexts (modern Western powers to the Middle East), intellectual contexts (political history, critical theory, translation studies), and academic disciplines (law, political science, linguistics, philosophy, literature). This textual abundance of theoretical paradigms, conceptual maps, and scientific epistemologies invoked throughout the book, while certainly displaying the intrinsic complexity of the notion of language rights, paradoxically results in an often-blurred line of reasoning, which renders the book's original and intriguing thesis as more of an assertion than a substantiated argument. The textual and epistemic egalitarianism seemingly endorsed by the book often makes it unclear as to who is saying what, or on whose behalf, and on precisely what grounds. The discussion on linguistic identification in international policymaking, for example, and the subsequent recognition of the need for a narrative of the self, moves within a single paragraph between the psychoanalysis of Erik Erikson, Jean-Paul Sartre's lecture on *Existentialism is a humanism*, Alasdair MacIntyre's moral and political philosophy, and Slavoj Žižek's cultural history (170–71). While the cited authors and works certainly share a common theme, being stripped from any substantial contexts (e.g. origins, motivations, approaches, frameworks, disciplines) paradoxically results in a simplified and decontextualized thematic connection between them.

Similarly, the argument that "ecolinguistics' inclinations towards linguistic determinism, equating language loss with the loss of social alternatives... end up denying human individuality and capacity for imagination", is referenced to

Hannah Arendt's *The human condition* (211). One can infer that, since Arendt's work was published before the emergence of contemporary ecolinguistics, Arendt's text is presumably invoked in order to suggest that Arendt's philosophy endorses the claim that the human condition is that of imaginative individuals. But is it Arendt's own position? Her analysis of ancient Greek philosophy? Or of modern European thought? The reader is left with the understanding that there is a CERTAIN conception of the human condition that perceives individuals as imaginative beings, but very little beyond that regarding the source of the claim, the context of the debate that produced it, or how it has been reached. The book does make an attempt to provide some context by identifying particular authors (e.g. Humboldt as philosopher and "educationalist" (78) or language economist François Grin as "key language rights academic" (38)). Similarly, it identifies as "influential" a certain number of authors (e.g. Isaiah Berlin) and texts (e.g. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, p. 75; and Robert Phillipson's *Linguistic Imperialism*, p. 121). These, however, are numerous and sporadic, and paradoxically seem to contribute to the epistemic vagueness of the text rather than mitigate it.

The book's methodological vagueness stands out in comparison with the clarity with which the main thesis of the book is stated, namely the shift from free speech to linguistic governance. It is also at odds with the overarching framework of the book, which consistently combines a Foucauldian critique of governance with Thomas Paine's and John Stuart Mills' ideas concerning the freedom of speech. Similar vagueness characterizes the largely unnamed "language rights advocates" invoked through the books (in effect pertaining mostly to Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, and, context-dependent, also Luisa Maffi and Terralingua NGO), particularly when these "advocates" are depicted—without sufficient evidence—as "hostile to modernity" (199), who are concerned that "to modernize indigenous peoples would undermine their potential to act as a refuge against modernity" (206), that they "tend to question people's capacity to think critically and engage in politics" (208), and "end up denying human individuality and capacity for imagination" (211). It is never clarified, however, what is precisely meant by "modernity" (industrialization? social and ecological engineering? urbanization? secularisation?) or "humanity", let alone concepts that seem to constitute the author's (unspecified) conceptual map of the good state of society, such as "progressive," "democracy," and "emancipatory". Even "politics" itself remains ultimately under-specified throughout the book, other than a very broad image of some authentic and unconstrained expressivity.

A significant part of the book is devoted to highlighting tensions between intentions, justifications, practices, and outcomes, presumably guided by the belief that such tensions and incompatibilities designate these positions as illogical and therefore invalid. But tension is a structural feature of democratic politics, not a dysfunction. Democratic values such as equality and liberty are constantly balanced AGAINST each other, not ranked in accordance to a scale of absolute significance. Pupavac's self-identification "with a libertarian political and civil rights tradition, which supports

language rights and freedoms of speech as expression” (4) that are perceived as “not negotiable or subject to being balanced” (232) is therefore at odds with this basic structural feature of a democratic thought. The demand for an equal, maximal, negative liberty, or a fully controlled self-ownership, is an exciting angle on the language of language rights, but it ultimately seems to downplay, if not entirely disregard, human INTERDEPENDENCE as a constitutive part of the linguistic human condition, and consequently of the politics of language. The unresolvable tension between societal interdependence and linguistic difference is where the need for language policy and language politics arises in the first place. Such tension, however, cannot be simply neutralized away by grounding language practices in an absolute negative liberty.

The refusal of democratic politics to cater to moral absolutism is where the author’s libertarian insistence on unconstrained free speech comes at odds with the very same type of politics she presumably wishes to advance. Ultimately, the book seems so preoccupied with telling us why global governance is wrong, that it doesn’t make the place or the effort to tell us what it sees as a POSITIVE way of addressing tensions in culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse societies. The Foucauldian refusal to chart at least a basic idea of what a GOOD state of society is, or what are its institutions and epistemic categories, Walzer notes, is what makes his political thinking so weak despite the powerful relentlessness of his argumentation (Walzer 2002:209). Walzer’s description of Foucauld’s politics as “lonely” seems well-suited to describe Pupavac’s approach, since it seems primarily interested in individual expressivity but much less so in human political interaction and decision-making.

To be sure, the book proposes an intriguing and unconventional angle on the language rights debate. Pupavac rightly raises important concerns over the suitability of a legal framework to capture and address the dynamics of something as creative and self-constitutive as language. The application of the book’s original thesis to the case study of Yugoslavia and Bosnia (169–96) is a lucid and thought-provoking critique of the presumed potential of a language-rights framework to pacify interethnic tensions (pp. 95–122, somewhat echoing Wee’s analysis of Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Singapore). Pupavac’s argument is powerful and relentless indeed, demonstrating the complex intricacies—and important shortcomings—of the language rights debate. But its textual and epistemological vagueness, coupled with the underspecified content of key concepts such as “democracy,” “politics,” and “emancipatory,” ultimately render the book more as a thought-provoking theoretical commentary on the language of language rights, rather than a focused and constructive critique of the language politics that transpires from it.

REFERENCES

- Freeland, Jane, & DonnaPatrick (eds.) (2004). *Language rights and language survival*. Manchester: St. Jerome.
- Kymlicka, Will, & AlanPatten (eds.) (2003). *Language rights and political theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BOOK REVIEWS

- May, Stephen (2001). *Language and minority rights: Ethnicity, nationalism, and the politics of language*. London: Longman.
- Pavlenko, Aneta (2011). Language rights versus speakers' right: On the applicability of western language rights approach in eastern European contexts. *Language Policy* 11:37–58.
- Peled, Yael (2011). Language, rights, and the language of language rights: The need for a new conceptual framework in the political theory of language policy. *Journal of Language and Politics* 10(3):436–65.
- Walzer, Michael (2002). *The company of critics*. New York: Basic Books.
- Wee, Lionel (2010). *Language without rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Whiteley, Peter (2003). Do language rights serve indigenous interests? Some Hopi and other queries. *American Anthropologist* 105(4):712–22.

(Received 15 July 2013)

Language in Society 43 (2014)
doi:10.1017/S0047404514000244

H. SAMY ALIM & GENEVA SMITHERMAN, *Articulate while Black: Barack Obama, language, and race in the US*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xviii, 205. Pb. \$24.95.

Reviewed by MICHAEL S. BURNS
English, West Chester University
West Chester, PA 19383, USA
MBurns2@wcupa.edu

Articulate while Black: Barack Obama, language, and race in the US addresses the impact of Barack Obama's candidacy and presidency on language and racial politics. H. Samy Alim & Geneva Smitherman combine in-depth sociolinguistic analyses of Obama's language across a range of rhetorical situations with a metalinguistic approach in addressing discourse related to Obama's ways of communicating. In addition to drawing on key scholarship in language and culture studies, the authors use a range of popular resources including conversations and surveys with younger members of the Obama Generation, responses from mainstream media outlets, and Hip Hop culture texts. Even as Alim & Smitherman offer examples of the president's styleshifting, the authors themselves employ a range of discourses throughout the book, intermingling academic jargon with Black English syntax.

Ch. 1, "'Nah, we straight': Black language and America's first black president", presents the book's goal of *LANGUAGING RACE*, equally valuing language's role in the racial politics of the United States (3). Alim & Smitherman argue that Obama's ability to integrate elements of White and Black English in his speech was central to his being elected the first Black president. They also take the position that Obama's way of using language has been an important tool in his navigation of a racially charged political landscape. The authors pair detailed analysis of Obama's language use with a more general sociolinguistic discussion of Black