

Bilingual Education and its Threat to the Nation Form

The United States has often been called “the nation of immigrants” and “the melting pot of cultures.” Americans consider themselves members of a diverse and welcoming culture and pride themselves on that fact. National holidays celebrate the efforts of civil rights leaders and the national anthem praises the “land of the free.” However, when considering immigration laws, one could say that the United States is not as free, diverse nor as welcoming as it may appear. This is evident in how quickly “foreigners” are strongly encouraged, if not socially forced, to assimilate to American culture. For example, consider how third-generation immigrants rarely speak the language of their heritage (Gort 32). Through society and the education system, the United States is actually undermining diversity rather than promoting it. This is to ensure the success of what Etienne Balibar calls “the nation form,” which depends on establishing the uniformity of all people of the nation. By examining the works of Antonia Darder and Mileidis Gort we shall explore how the current nation form is threatened by bilingual education and a bicultural society.

In “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” from *Race, Nation, Class* written in conjunction with Immanuel Wallerstein, Etienne Balibar explores how language is an essential part of the “fictive ethnicity” that comprises the nation form. He claims that language, as well as race, “express the idea that the national character (which might also be called its soul or its spirit) is immanent in the people” (96). Language, he explains, represents nationality and acts as a unifying agent within the nation. Balibar states that language is sometimes the single commonality between different people, yet by speaking the same language those people automatically share a strong connection. He asserts that language connects people to a common

origin and gives them a sense of belonging. Those who speak the same language become part of a larger being, whether it is a neighborhood, community or nation. By declaring an “official” language, the government encourages an even greater sense of belonging. Furthermore, language surpasses the dividing lines of class and social inequalities; whether through television, politics, literature, business or a casual “excuse me” when passing on the street, language engages all who speak it. Balibar states that the language community is promoted through the family life, economy, school and state. In these ways, a linguistic ethnicity forms to help “produce the people” of a nation.

Once formed, a language community plays a decisive role in establishing a “fictive ethnicity.” Balibar explains that the nation cultivates the community and the commonalities between people, such as language, through the structures of family, school, government and in the workplace. For example, compulsory education and public schools teach the reading and writing of the national language, thus ensuring that all members of the nation speak one common language and belong to the language community. Furthermore, the nation turns this community into a fabricated ethnicity in order to create a sense of belonging and thus ensure the reproduction of the nation form. Balibar claims,

No nation possesses an ethnic base naturally, but as social formations are nationalized, the populations included within them...are ethnicized...as if they formed a natural community, possessing of itself an identity of origins, culture and interests which transcends individuals and social conditions. (96)

Here, Balibar explains the process of creating a “fictive ethnicity.” The nation encourages commonalities such as language to become a defining part of a person’s identity. It is through fictive ethnicity that a person comes to identify themselves as a part of the nation. By possessing

the “national” qualities defined by fictive ethnicity (such as language, race or religion), one may conclude that he or she belongs to the nation. The nation benefits from fictive ethnicity because it unifies and distinguishes the nation as its own.

Although such a linguistic ethnicity may appear to be a benefit for the nation form and all people of the nation, because of how it unifies and promotes belonging, it also promotes exclusion and reveals difference. This exclusion, however, is far more destructive for the marginalized populations than the sense of belonging is beneficial to those who can identify with the fictive ethnicity. Along with all those who speak the “official” language and “belong” to the nation, there are also those who do not fit the “fictive ethnicity” and are estranged from the nation form. Balibar states that, “the national language...supposes a common code and even a common norm” (97). According to this idea, those who do not speak the “national language” fail to be a part of the national commonality created through language. In this light, linguistic ethnicity is a way to enforce social hierarchy in a nation. Those who do not belong to the dominant culture must either assimilate or submit to being labeled as inferior citizens of the nation. Furthermore, dissent between these divided groups often causes conflicts, which leads to injustice and violence. Those who protest their subordination are seen as rebels who will not conform to society’s standards and are thus labeled as enemies to the nation form.

For those who consider the nation form to be the pathway to the success and prosperousness of the nation, any threat against the nation form must be confronted immediately and prevented. Balibar clearly asserts the importance of language as an agent that upholds the nation form. He claims that, “the ideal nation [is] recognizable by a common language which belongs to them as their own” (98). The nation’s ability to survive and develop depends on the

capacity of one common language to hold the nation together and produce a “fictive ethnicity” to which all people *must* belong.

Furthermore, according to Balibar, “schooling is the principal institution which produces ethnicity as linguistic community” (98). To Balibar, the education system is the primary means of ensuring the reproduction of the nation form through, in part, the continuation of a common language. Through education, young members of the nation are taught the ways of the nation form. Students develop into advocates for the nation form and its ideas. Thus the nation form reproduces itself, generation after generation.

Antonia Darder, assistant Professor of Education at Claremont Graduate School and founder of the first graduate program in bicultural development in the nation, describes the cultural dominance that occurs in the education of bicultural students in her publication, *Culture and Power in the Classroom: A Critical Foundation for Bicultural Education*. Although many would consider education to be an equalizing agent between students of different backgrounds and resources, Darder asserts that today’s school system actually reinforces the societal hierarchy. She claims that culture and power are strongly connected throughout the world, especially in the classroom. Hegemony exists in the educational system and is evident by the oppression of the minority culture by the dominant one, as Darder explains: “[t]he dominant school culture functions not only to support the interests and values of the dominant society, but also to marginalize and invalidate knowledge forms and experiences that are significant to subordinate and oppressed groups” (79). Because education in American is public, and so an arm of the government, the nation’s culture extends its influence to the school system. Thus, the students who belong to the dominant culture also dominate in the classroom. There is a socially constructed hierarchy in the public school system between the upper-class students and the

bicultural students. Darder explains that it is not only the language and class barriers that put bicultural students at a disadvantage but it is also the fact that, despite the intentions of others, schools serve as sorting mechanisms for our society. Darder's assertions with respect to how culture divides the students of a classroom strongly support Balibar's thoughts on language and how it can be used to both unite a group yet exclude those who do not belong.

Having identified the role of language as part of the hegemony of the English language in the American school system, one may wonder why more is not done to integrate bilingual education and meet the needs of the bicultural students. Mileidis Gort, assistant professor of Bilingual Education at the Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut, explores the benefits, misconceptions and future possibilities of bilingual education in the United States in her article, "Bilingual Education: Good for U.S.?" published in Language and Cultural Diversity in U.S. Schools. In her essay, Gort first gives a brief overview of the many forms of bilingual education. According to her research, the success rate for non-native English speaking students is much higher in bilingual programs than in those that stress English-language emersion. Among those bilingual programs, data shows that programs teaching native-language development with a gradual transition to English have proven the most effective of the bilingual methods. However, bilingual education still stirs quite a controversy among Americans today. Much of the controversy stems from common misconceptions about how bilingual programs threaten the "official" English language and that bilingual education is a way to escape having to learn English. However, these misconceptions have some truth to them. Although native languages are no threat to the prominence of English in America, Gort illuminates the fact that bilingualism is controversial because it empowers the minority language and culture. To Gort, "Bilingual education is above all a political issue, not an educational one, because it is concerned

with the relative power, or lack thereof, of various groups in the United States and the practice of equalizing the playing field for members of traditionally subordinate cultures” (34). She claims that, by instructing student-citizens in another language other than English, the school system gives power and status to a language and culture other than that which is posited by the fictive ethnicity of the American nation form. Although English is not the national language of the United States in a legal sense, it is an essential part of American culture and the defining language of fictive ethnicity in the United States. Therefore a threat to the prominence of the English language is a threat to the American nation form.

Gort also reveals the contradiction that exists between whom and when someone becomes bilingual. She notes that although the U.S. education system encourages English-speaking high school students to learn a second language, students who enter the school system speaking a foreign language are forced to abandon their native language and speak only English. Furthermore, the United States programs for foreign language education are insubstantial when compared to countries across the globe that require a much more rigorous second-language education for all of their students. Gort provides evidence supporting the benefits of bilingual education in the United States. Her ideas about how bilingualism empowers the subordinate culture ties into Balibar’s discussion of language, hegemony and the nation form.

If the nation form advocates for the unification of all people under one common language and fictive ethnicity, then perhaps one may conclude that bilingual education is a cause worth fighting for. As Gort explains: “To advocate for bilingual education is to argue for the value of heterogeneity of viewpoints, histories, sociopolitical realities, and languages and to promote the intrinsic worth of diversity in general” (34). This quote goes to the very heart of why bilingual

education is controversial in today's society: it has the power to destroy the uniformity and sense of belonging that so many people cling to.

Organizations like *El Centro de la Raza*¹ are building the future for a stronger, more diverse nation. By providing services to minority populations, El Centro de la Raza empowers communities and encourages its clients to embrace bilingualism and multiculturalism. They offer classes on citizenship, financial literacy and voter registration to promote self-sufficiency and community involvement while also providing bilingual after-school programs, homeless assistance, infant mortality prevention, and a "*La Cocina*" Latino meal program. What sets El Centro de La Raza apart from other service organizations is how, instead of teaching minorities to assimilate to the United States, this organization provides services to help minorities adjust to and succeed in life in the United States while maintaining their bicultural identity. Whereas the nation form would seek to exclude these populations from belonging to the nation, organizations like El Centro de la Raza not only accept but also encourage the biculturalism and bilingualism of these people. Estranged by the fictive ethnicity created by an English-only society, populations turn to organizations like El Centro de la Raza to meet their needs and help break the social barriers constructed by the nation form and fictive ethnicity. In these ways, organizations like El Centro de la Raza are working against the ideals of uniformity that the nation form enforces. Darder states, "Above all things, a critical pedagogy must encompass an un-wavering commitment to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequities and injustices" (76). Whether in the public school system or in the education of people through service organizations, it is essential that we embrace the dissolution of the nation form by striving to establish a bilingual education system, a multicultural society, and a diverse nation.

¹ The fact that MLA style requires foreign language phrases to be italicized in academic papers further exemplifies the dominance of the English language. Even in writing, words in languages other than English must be identified as "foreign" and set apart within the document.

Works Cited

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