

# H-Net Reviews

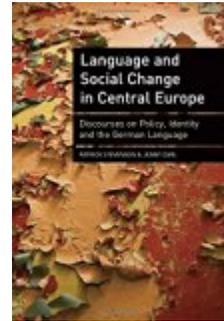
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Patrick Stevenson, Jenny Carl. *Language and Social Change in Central Europe: Discourses on Policy, Identity, and the German Language*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. 256 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-3598-6.

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## The German Language in Central Europe

Germans and the German language have a long and rich history in Central Europe with both innocuous consequences, like the number of German-language writers from the area (e.g., Franz Kafka and Egon Erwin Kisch), and considerably more dire consequences, like Hitler's 1938 demand of the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia on the grounds that a sizable number of Germans (or at least German-speakers) lived in the area. The German language currently has a somewhat schizophrenic status in the area: it is simultaneously a majority language, in that it is the national language of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, and a minority language, in that there are pockets of German speakers remaining in the other individual nation-states, even if German is not an official language. It also remains one of the two most important foreign languages in the nations where it does not enjoy official status, normally trailing only behind English. The volume under consideration here, written by a British sociolinguist with a number of important works on German sociolinguistics to his credit (Patrick Stevenson) and by a German social scientist whose research deals mostly with the United Kingdom (Jenny Carl), is "a partial contemporary (hi)story of the German language and its speakers in Central Europe.... It is a story of the tensions between competing political discourses on the one hand and individual responses to these forces on the other" (p. 4). Although there have been smaller-scale studies of this and related topics (most famously perhaps Susan Gal's work, including an article with the memorable title, "Peasant Men Can't Get Wives"; or the papers

collected in an earlier volume edited by the authors of this book), this larger-scale work fills a real gap in scholarly literature.[1]

The book consists of five thematic chapters, along with introductory and concluding chapters, as well as a number of appendices, generally reproducing, in whole or in part, important related documents (e.g., appendix B reprints the "Preamble to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages," while appendix O provides a selection from the "2007 Hungarian National Core Curriculum").

The first thematic chapter, "Discourses on Language in Social Life: Theoretical and Methodological Orientations," first discusses "discourses on language," defined as "the cumulative amalgamation, the multiple iteration, across time, of particular positions on language that are shared and passed on.... They are all, in some sense, an intervention, a comment, on the nature of linguistic forms, practices, or behaviours" (p. 11). Such discourses include language and globalization, language policies, and linguistic purism, among others. Next comes a section on various theoretical uses of these discourses, reviewing topics like language ideologies, work on connections between language and identity, and discourses on language policies. The final section of this chapter treats the data: how was it gathered, interpreted, and analyzed?

The second thematic chapter, "Sociolinguistic Histories and the Footprint of German in Eastern Central Eu-

rope,” focuses mainly on Hungary and the Czech Republic. It first discusses the present status of German in these two countries, revealing some interesting facts in the process (e.g., after the end of communist reign, teachers of Russian were often retrained as teachers of German; and in 2006-07, far many more Hungarian children studied German in elementary school than English, while the situation was reversed in secondary school). The authors then turn to the history of German in these two countries, covering the various waves of migrations of German speakers to these areas, the rise of language as a unifying force, the impact of the two World Wars and communism on the status of German, and the post-1989 situation. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the legal frameworks regarding the status of German in these two countries: in the Czech Republic, for example, “members of national minorities have the right to choose education in minority languages for their children” (p. 70), a right that looks better in theory than in practice, as speakers of German were long discriminated against, often resulting in assimilation, while the general dispersal of German-speaking populations further complicates matters.

The third thematic chapter, “Language Policy Discourses: Interventions and Intersections,” deals with more macro-level issues, specifically how “present-day policies on language, multilingualism and national identity ... are linked vertically with discourses on the EU level as well as horizontally with the discourses on foreign cultural policy in Germany and Austria” (p. 82). Vertical links discussed in this chapter include connections with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the European Union’s 2005 and 2008 “Communications on Multilingualism” (p. 91). Horizontal links include various German and Austrian statements on the topic, e.g., “the [German] strategy paper *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik-Konzeption 2000*” (p. 99). The chapter then surveys discourse on internal language policies in Hungary and the Czech Republic, e.g., “how policies are formulated, how they are positioned in relation to the European Union and other EU member states externally on the one hand, and in relation to linguistic diversity ‘within’ on the other” (p. 107).

The fourth thematic chapter, “Language (Auto)biographies: Narrating Multilingual Selves,” segues back to the more micro-level, as it aims to determine “how individuals gave shape to their lives in the way they tell their own life stories and, in particular, how they use their experiences with language as elements in the construction of a sense of self” (p. 158). To

do so, the authors draw on autobiographical stories about language from a number of multilingual individuals, including István, a man in his forties living in a Hungarian town on the Austrian border, who tells the story of his grandfather’s conflict with a Hungarian man, as well as a town’s 1921 vote to remain part of Hungary; Katharina, a former German teacher from Hungary, who “does not want to be reduced to her Germanness” (p. 145); and Walter, an elderly man from the Czech Republic who has struggled greatly with authority (the Communist Party, etc.) during his life. The authors conclude that “while such stories are uniquely personal in their constitution and composition, they are closely linked with each other and with wider narratives of language in social life ... it is through the combination of interdiscursive relationships and internal narrative management that the stories acquire or generate their meaning” (p. 158).

The final thematic chapter, “Linguistic Ideologies: Negotiating Linguistic Identities,” also relies on personal narratives, but this time with a focus on how language biographies can be used to negotiate identity, asking questions such as how does one categorize oneself, how does one position oneself (as Czech, Hungarian, German, etc.)? Moreover, how were these relationships with language altered by external political, social, and cultural events? Walter, for example, the man mentioned in the previous paragraph, who speaks both Czech and German, “positions himself unequivocally as a German in the very specific sense of a ‘member of the German nation’ (‘I have always declared myself as belonging to the German nation,’ *ich hab mich immer zur deutschen nation bekannt*)” (p. 173), yet simultaneously views himself as distinct from “Germans in Germany,” as when he complains about German neologisms like *Azubi*, “trainees,” which he sees as unproblematic for them, but problematic for people like him (p. 174). For Walter, in fact, his connection seems to be with the German-speaking minority in what is now the Czech Republic, despite his claim of “belonging to the German nation” (p. 174).

In this sort of work, there is a real danger of writing what the authors label “a paean to the past glories of Germanophone cultural traditions ... [or] a lament over the declining standing of the language” (p. 4). This danger is understandable; there is often a strong tendency towards nostalgia for an (of course) idealized version of the past, which one can envision (imaginary) informants describing as “a time when everyone spoke German and everything was better” (p. 4). This sort of nostalgia may be understandable, and it may crop up repeatedly in various forms of entertainment (e.g., baseball fans who ar-

gue that the game was better before the American League introduced the designated hitter rule in 1973; or the *Ostalgie* found in the popular 2003 movie *Good Bye Lenin!*), but it has no place in sober scholarship. And happily, Stevenson and Cook have avoided this danger and produced a readable, detailed survey of the relevant issues. I was particularly happy to find such rich and engaging data in the linguistic (auto)biographies contained in the text—the more data, the better, especially when it is employed as skillfully as it is here. The argumentation flows well from topic to topic; the appendices provide periodically useful information that supports the discussion in

the main text (although many of the political documents they reprint make for very dry reading). For those interested in the subject matter, this book is a real find.

#### Note

[1]. Susan Gal, “Peasant Men Can’t Get Wives: Language Change and Sex Roles in a Bilingual Community,” *Language in Society* 7 (1978): 1-16; Carl and Stevenson, eds., *Language, Discourse and Identity in Central Europe: The German Language in a Multilingual Space* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

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