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The Psychopolitics of Language and Communication

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Otherwise disparate political issues are joined by controversy over language and communication.

The United States: Domestic Education of Immigrants. Do immigrants need to learn the language of their adopted homeland? Should they be required to learn this language? Should their adopted homeland be flexible enough to offer social, political, and economic opportunity through the immigrant's native language? If the adopted homeland's language should also be taught, how should this occur? Should the language of instruction be in the native or adopted language? Should non-language courses be taught in the native or adopted language? Should there be concurrent training in both languages? Are immigrants being oppressed or repressed or stripped of cultural heritage by pressure to learn the language and culture of an adopted homeland? Should there be legislation requiring adopted language proficiency for citizenship? For hiring? Should there be legislation mandating an official language?

Yes, there is much psychological research to help answer these questions. But much of it seems contaminated with the political and cultural biases of the researchers. And even the carrying out of methodologically sound studies is often stymied by the biases of participants--students, parents, and teachers--who have their own ideas about what the results should be and how they should be interpreted.

People's Republic of China: Reversion of Colonies to the Motherland. The time is fast approaching for Hong Kong to revert to the People's Republic of China (PRC.) And there is controversy over how much PRC authorities are already and will be putting pressure on Hong Kong residents to speak Mandarin instead of Cantonese--even though Cantonese may be becoming more popular among mainland citizens who are oriented towards international trade, and even though at least some Hong Kong citizens--perhaps to curry favor with PRC authorities--are choosing to speak Mandarin in public places. Meanwhile, some Hong Kong institutes and agencies are for the first time, or more frequently, offering Mandarin.

The political backdrop to pressures and choices about Mandarin and Cantonese involves anything from conceptions of sovereignty, efforts at political control, desires to increase or decrease homogeneity among citizens, grudges going back to the Civil War between Communist and Nationalist forces, efforts to secure an edge in business and commerce, unconscious psychosexual complexes, and resonance with classical Chinese literature well before the rise of the Communist Party in China.

The Global Environment: Aviation Safety. In the last five years fatal accidents per million flights have been highest by far in Africa, then Asia, the South and Central America, Europe, and North America and the Caribbean. Safest of all has been Australia. Although language and communication may or may not be primary causal factors in flight accidents, they have been implicated in several recent crashes--e.g., the December 20, 1995 crash of an American Airlines craft bound for Cali, Colombia or the November 13, 1993 crash of a China Northern craft bound for Urumqi. Moreover, with air traffic expanding to areas

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

that haven't had time, money, training resources, or the will to become language proficient in aviation communication, more such accidents may be just over the horizon.

But besides the need to understand language adequately for expressing and receiving aviation-related messages, politics affects the quality of people who are chosen for training, the reliability and validity of certification procedures, the frequency and quality of "booster sessions" to maintain and enhance competency, and conscious and unconscious ambivalence about language imperialism, e.g., the primary import of English in aviation.

One consistent theme running throughout the issues of immigration, reversion of territory, and aviation safety is the notion of language as a significant marker of turf, of sovereignty, of identity. Language conflict often leading to threatened or actual political violence has been intrinsic to the above issues but also to others, such as the independence movement in Quebec, cultural conflict in Belgium, and suppression of ethnic identity among Turks in Bulgaria during the last few years of the Soviet bloc and among Kurds in Turkey during antiterrorism and counterterrorism activities.

All these issues suggest that something very basic and psychologically primitive may be at the root of this language conflict. This something may be the sequelae of a process that occurs very early in psychological development. This process is the conscious and unconscious differentiation of self from other, good from bad, and right from wrong. How this differentiation occurs may not only be a harbinger of psychopathology or mental health but also may remain a source of irrational and illogical political conflict and violence.

The clinical observations and theories of neopsychoanalyst Melanie Klein, maligned by some colleagues, extolled by others, may identify and explicate the seething and brutal sexual and aggressive content of the differentiation process and its sequelae for interpersonal behavior. Her work would suggest that being in conflict about one's language is isomorphically parallel to being in conflict about one's very psychological existence--about what is self and what is other, what is good and what is bad, and so on. The sometimes inexplicable conflict and even violence which accompany the language wars may be about something far deeper and more basic. People may actually be fighting for their lives. (See Alford, C. F. (1993.) Greek tragedy, confusion, and Melanie Klein: Or is there an Oresteia complex? *American Imago*, 50, 1-28; Stein, R. (1990.) A new look at the theory of Melanie Klein. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 71; Wald, M. L. (December 9, 1996.) Language skills of pilots and air controllers seen as safety key. *The New York Times*, pp. 1; 12.) (Keywords: Language, communication.)