

BORDER BITES

“Digesting the world’s borders

...One bite at a time”



While the previous seven issues of Border Bites have focused our interest and attention on the importance of material and tangible borders, in this contribution I take on the topic of linguistic borders.

Colonization has left deep and almost unreparable gashes across large parts of the world, isolating and dividing Indigenous communities through the violent and arbitrary introduction of horizontal and vertical border lines. Although we know that international borders both define and constrain nation states, and that communities—particularly autochthonous groups—straddle and transect these borders precisely because they have inhabited those lands for long before the lines were drawn, most of us give relatively little attention to the processes by

On Linguistic Borders:

Official Language Policy in Settler-Colonial Nations

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which linguistic borders are created, nurtured and sustained. My goal in this contribution is to expose readers to examples of how language borders are enforced through three short case studies that reflect on how the settler-colonial states of Canada, the United States and New Zealand configure and legislate their linguistic borders through official language policies, and in so doing, imagine their sovereignty.

International political borders are sites of heightened linguistic anxiety and identity-making, if only because the communicative practices of the citizens on each side are more fluid and overlapping than the nation-states to which they belong would like to imagine. In the European context, an oft-cited example is that of the Dutch-German border.

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Figure 1: Street sign in Dutch and German ([https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neustraße_\(Herzogenrath\)#/media/File:Neustraße_Straßenschild.JPG](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neustraße_(Herzogenrath)#/media/File:Neustraße_Straßenschild.JPG)). Rights: CC BY-SA 3.0

On the Dutch side, along the eastern rim of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the people speak a language known to the world as Dutch. These individuals consume Dutch television and print media and are educated in Dutch language schools. On the German side of the very same border, running along the northwesterly perimeter of the Federal Republic of Germany, the local inhabitants speak a language known to the world as German. Here they consume German television and print media and are educated in German language schools. Yet, if you were to listen to the actual speech of the citizens who live along this international border, you would be hard pressed to tell them apart. While these Dutch and German citizens are imagined and popularly presented as linguistic cousins, in point of fact they are rather more like linguistic siblings. The Dutch and Germans that reside along this peaceful and essentially open political border are divided by a common language. It is precisely because of the similarity and close relatedness of these two languages that linguistic borders are policed with heightened care and commitment. Linguistic slippage and fuzziness threaten national imaginings of belonging and uniqueness, and recognition of linguistic ambiguity and the complex continuum of speech practice can be transgressive and disruptive to narratives that promote a clear-cut view of linguistic nationalism.

I currently live and teach in Canada, a nation with federally mandated bilingualism, where massive resources are devoted to supporting and maintaining both English and French. Signage is a rich domain for bilingualism to be explored and realized. According to national directives, all Government of Canada signs must conform to the requirements of the Official Languages Act, and all text is required to be displayed in a bilingual side-by-side format, regardless of language designation.

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Figure 2: Bilingual Government of Canada sign, by Bobby Hidy (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/mpd01605/3648738671/>). Rights: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>

Both English and French are required to be equal in content and character size.¹ Additionally, all federal Canadian government-only signs and signs used on highways must be bilingual regardless of whether this is mandated by local, provincial or territorial language requirements.² Clearly in the domain of language policy, federal jurisdiction trumps regional authority.

Nunavut and the Northwest Territories—two of Canada’s territories—accord official status to Indigenous languages. In Nunavut, both Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun have official status alongside English and French, Inuktitut is commonly used in the territorial government administration, and all signs are required to use the four official languages of the Territory. The Official Languages Act of the Northwest Territories goes a step further and recognizes eleven languages: Chipewyan, Cree, English, French, Gwich’in, Inuinnaqtun, Inuktitut, Inuvialuktun, North Slavey, South Slavey and Tłıchǫ. We may ask what it means to accord official status to eleven languages in a territory where the entire population is under 50,000?

In 2009, Canada’s Commissioner of Official Languages, Graham Fraser, was quoted as saying: “[I]n the same way that race is at the core of ... an American experience and class is at the core of

¹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/government-communications/federal-identity-program/technical-specifications/signage.html> [Accessed 16 December 2017].

² <http://www.infrastructure.gc.ca/pub/signage-panneaux/guidelines-lignesdirectrices-13-eng.html> [Accessed 16 December 2017].

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British experience, I think that language is at the core of Canadian experience.”³ While Fraser was referring to the friction inherent in the relationship between English and French, I would argue that the powerful tensions that exist between Indigenous and official languages are also central to the Canadian experience. Indigenous leaders in Canada have long advocated for Indigenous language revitalization to be a national issue. While English and French have federal support and protection as official languages, what place do Indigenous languages hold in the national consciousness?

Many Canadians are unaware of their own homegrown indigenous linguistic diversity of Indigenous nations in Canada, of the knowledge encoded within Indigenous languages and their importance to Indigenous communities. Connected to territory through traditional ecological knowledge and ceremony, Indigenous languages have vast historical depth, and are, at the same time, entirely modern. Visible on social media, and mobilized through online dictionaries, radio, art and music; these languages are spoken and taught in communities across Canada.⁴ Speaking to these very issues, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau addressed the Assembly of First Nations in December 2016, pledging to introduce a federal law to protect, preserve and revitalize



Figure 3: Stop sign in Inuktituk and English, by Alanah Heffez (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/alanahmontreal/3450298051/>). Rights: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>

³ Official Languages Commissioner Graham Fraser is quoted in Cynthia Münster, *Hill Times: Official Languages Act Still Needs Work 40 Years Later*. J. Creskey and R. Dickson, 31 August 2009.

⁴ Pam Brown, Jennifer Carpenter, Gerry Lawson, Kim Lawson, Lisa Nathan, and Mark Turin, “Uplifting Voices”, in Philippe Tortell, Peter Nemetz and Margot Young (eds.), *Reflections of Canada: Illuminating Our Opportunities and Challenges at 150+ Years*. Vancouver: Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies, 2017, pp. 264-269.

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First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages: “We know ... how residential schools and other decisions by government were used to eliminate Indigenous languages. We must undo the lasting damage that resulted...Today I commit to you our government will enact an Indigenous Languages Act.”⁵ The bitter irony of the current context is inescapable: colonial governments such as Canada have for centuries marshalled their economic, military and administrative might to extinguish Indigenous voices. Now, in the eleventh hour, Canada is looking to offer resources to that which it first set out to destroy. Many Indigenous commentators point to the fact that benign neglect would have been less damaging than two centuries of violence followed by a last-minute U-turn.



Figure 4: Warning sign in nsilxcən and English, Keremeos, BC, by Heather Joan (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/heatherjoan/9355425456/>). Rights: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>

While in its 200-year history, the United States has never yet seen fit to adopt an official language, a campaign to ‘officialize’ English has gathered momentum in recent years, “resting on the claim that the most successful and dominant world language is threatened in its bastion: the USA.”⁶ Advocacy organizations

⁵ Justin Trudeau, “Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s Speech to the Assembly of First Nations Special Chiefs Assembly”. Gatineau, Quebec. 12 December 2016. <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2016/12/06/prime-minister-justin-trudeaus-speech-assembly-first-nations-special-chiefs-assembly> [Accessed 16 December 2017].

⁶ Pier Guiseppe Monateri, “‘Cunning Passages’. Comparison and ideology in the law and language story”, in Rodolfo Sacco and Luca Castellani (eds.), *Les Multiples Langues du Droit Européen Uniforme*. Torino, Italy: Editrice L’Harmattan Italia, 1999, pp. 123-141.



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such *U.S. English* promote legislation to ensure that official government business at all levels be conducted solely in English. This would include all public documents, records, legislation and regulations, as well as hearings, official ceremonies and public meetings. According their website,⁷ U.S. English was instrumental in passing H.R. 123, “The Bill Emerson English Language Empowerment Act of 1996.” While that bill, which would have made English the official language of the U.S. government, passed in the House of Representatives with a bipartisan vote of 259-169, the Senate did not act on the bill before the end of the session. Notably different from the Canadian context outlined above, in which federal jurisdiction trumps the provinces with regard to language legislation, thirty-two U.S. states now have some form of official English law while federal legislation remains out of reach.

This sense of North American linguistic fragility is far from new, with many US leaders (including Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson) expressing deep concerns about growing immigration from the German empire, as the German language which the migrants carried with them was considered to reflect a culture incompatible with republican democracy. In 1907, US President Theodore Roosevelt articulated his own strongly-worded vision on the subject: “We have room for but one language in this country, and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house.”⁸

In June 1995, Newt Gingrich informed a group of Iowa business leaders that “English has to be our common language, otherwise we’re not going to have a civilization.”⁹ Only a few months later, gearing up to be the Republic presidential candidate, Robert ‘Bob’ Dole announced to the 77th national convention of the American Legion in Indiana that:

⁷ <https://www.usenglish.org/official-english/about-the-issue/> [Accessed 16 December 2017].

⁸ Theodore Roosevelt, *Works; Vol. XXIV*, New York: Charles Scribner's 11 Sons, 1926: 554.

⁹ *New York Times*, Thursday, June 8, 1995, p. 22, Section A.

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Figure 4: Sticker sold in Colorado, USA, demanding that immigrants speak English (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English-only_movement#/media/File:Welcome_to_America,_indeed_4891695155.jpg).

“Insisting that all our citizens are fluent in English is a welcoming act of inclusion. We need the glue of language to help hold us together. We must stop the practice of multi-lingual education as a means of instilling ethnic pride or as a therapy for low self-esteem or out of elitist guilt over a culture built on the traditions of the West.”¹⁰

There are many rhetorical flourishes worth analyzing in Gingrich and Dole’s proclamations, in particular the promise of a Babel-like end of society if the shared tongue is lost, the apparent oxymoron that ‘inclusion’ can somehow be ‘insisted’ upon, and Dole’s choice of the term ‘glue’ for the collective sense of belonging that language instils. Aside from the ideological posturing, though, these strident statements echo a common concern that plurilingualism and particularly bilingual education programs are a force of social decomposition and national disunification. The sum of these atomized and individualized identities, the argument supposes, will no longer cohere into a sense of belonging.

The underlying positions in this debate are exposed by Aristide Zolberg and Long Litt Woon in their article entitled ‘Why Islam is like Spanish’. Arguing that both Islam and Spanish have become metonyms for the perceived dangers of immigration—namely, a loss of cultural identity, disintegration, separatism and commu-

¹⁰ Bob Dole, “Remarks prepared for delivery, American Legion Convention, Indianapolis, 1995”, as cited in James Crawford, *At War with Diversity: U.S. Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2000: 35.

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nal conflict—the authors show how Islam in Europe can be understood as structurally similar to Spanish in the United States. In the US, “the English language emerged very early on as a crucial unifying element, entrusted with the mission of balancing...diversity.” Seen from this perspective, then, the expanding reach of Spanish, the “common speech of an expanding population”, feeds “fantasies of a malignant growth that threatens national unity.”¹¹

Whereas Canada has extended unequivocal federal support to English and French—both languages of colonial settlement—and is currently grappling with how to recognize and resource the many Indigenous languages within its borders, the United States has resisted the proclamation of one (or more) official languages at the federal level, even though many of the states that make up the union have enacted legislation to enshrine English as the language of official communication. Against this backdrop, the position taken by another settler-colonial nation—Aotearoa New Zealand—is of particular interest.

Although the New Zealand variety of English is the main language of communication across most of Aotearoa New Zealand—and could therefore be argued to act as a *de facto* official language—English actually holds no official status in the country. It may be surprising to learn that the only two languages



Figure 6: Dual language sign in Te Reo Māori and English, by Travel Aficionado (https://www.flickr.com/photos/travel_aficionado/8461613131/). Rights: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>

¹¹ Aristide Zolberg & Long Litt Woon, “Why Islam is like Spanish: Cultural incorporation in Europe and the United States”, *Politics and Society*, 27.1 (1999), pp. 5-38.

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that have official billing in Aotearoa New Zealand are Te Reo Māori—the Māori language—through the Maori Language Act of 1987 (which extended Māori speakers the right to use their mother tongue in legal settings and in court) and New Zealand Sign Language (which was declared an official language through the passing of the New Zealand Sign Language Act of 2006). Revealingly, even though the Royal Society of New Zealand recently argued that “it is important for full societal participation and realization of potential that all New Zealand residents have access to learning advanced levels of English”, English is accorded no official status in government legislation.¹² Te Reo Māori can be seen in official signage across the nation, and many official place names in Aotearoa New Zealand are actually ‘dual names’, linguistic forms that incorporate elements of both original Māori toponyms and more recent English names that have come to be used since European colonization.



Figure 6: Dual language sign in Te Reo Māori and English, by Carina Puff (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/137505082@N05/25055736125/>). Rights: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>

The approach to language legislation and linguistic border-making taken by Aotearoa New Zealand is patently different to

¹² Royal Society of New Zealand, *Languages in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Wellington: Royal Society of New Zealand, 2013.



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the pathways chosen by Canada and the United States. Canada enshrines support for English and French—languages that really need no defending—and is now struggling to recognize the rich Indigenous linguistic diversity within its borders. The United States has effectively dodged the issue of extending legislative support to a single language at a federal level, allowing individual states to enact regional legislation as they see fit. Commendably, the politicians and bureaucrats of Aotearoa New Zealand have chosen to use the legislative muscle of government to extend official support to two languages that will benefit from the resources and visibility that such a status will bring—Te Reo Māori and New Zealand Sign—in their understanding that English is perfectly secure without muscular legislation. These brief case studies offer insights into the profoundly different ways that three otherwise quite similar settler-colonial nations imagine and legislate their national language policy, and thereby regulate and manage their linguistic borders.

In conclusion, this contribution has shown that even though linguistic borders and boundaries appear relatively intangible, they are patrolled with a vigor that equals the commitment shown to managing political borders etched into the physical landscape. Strong opinions about language are held by national language academies and authorities, the media, educators, politicians and even the general public, if only because each and every human speaks or signs at least one language, and our choice and use of language remains a central aspect of what give us our identity and sense of belonging to a wider community.

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