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BOOK REVIEW

**Minority languages and dominant culture: Issues of education, assessment and social equity**, by Mary Kalantzis, Bill Cope and Diana Slade, Barcombe, Lewes: Falmer Press, 1989.

It is important to signal from the start that this review considers only this particular book by Kalantzis and her co-workers. Some of the reviewer's concerns have been dealt with quite satisfactorily in other publications by the Wollongong group. The present work appears to represent a form of summary of a good deal of challenging research carried out by the group during the nineteen-eighties. The reason for making this point clear is that *Minority Languages and Dominant Culture* (henceforth MLDC) appears to lack the coherent structure normally present in a single work, and which indeed might be expected from the authors' own comments. For this reviewer the book does not hold together well. Indeed, it proved at times an exercise in frustration. So much that is challenging and rewarding is left at a point where much more might have been offered. There is much that is challenging and rewarding, a point worth stressing. Perhaps what was needed was either a very much longer book, or a decision to focus on less.

After a brief introduction, the first, theoretical, chapter on language and culture contains a number of important points and useful reminders. The authors demonstrate succinctly the need to identify and take into account the economic and social organisation of the nation in which several ethnic groups are located, and the need for a dynamic view of culture - a point frequently made in the past by Bullivant and others. In arguing against simple notions of linguistic pluralism, the authors make a basic but telling point. "We simply wish to point out that the picture is larger and more complex than being one of linguistic diversity. The arguments about rights and needs cannot be abstracted from the processes, in which languages function and interact" (p.23).

The authors then present a three-level model of culture, arguing strongly both that it is holistic and that this is necessary to understand the dynamics of culture. In this model, the third level is that of "custom, self-expression, ways of behaving" (Fig. 1,2, p.24). It is at this level, say the authors, that differing customs and cultures can be maintained and valued. The second level is that of "major types of political-social-economic-cultural arrangements" with Western industrialism proposed as the sole model for modern First World societies. Level one concerns things common to all human cultures and "what culture is for". The example offered is "Language as communication".

While this provides a useful way of categorising cultures, and of examining issues in cultural pluralism, it may also be that too much is subsumed under the third level. The mutual exclusivity of the levels is not strongly argued, nor is it explained how these levels can vary within an approach to culture that is supposedly dynamic and holistic.<sup>1</sup> It is not clear, for example, whether a family collective based on traditional customs and values, operating in a western economy but serving a particular minority group, should be part of a level two or a level three analysis. Yet the major thrust of the argument appears to be both valid and worthy of further study.

The second chapter, on "key debates" in language, is perhaps the least satisfactory in the book. While it does in part what the authors intended - develop some of the major points from chapter one - each of the three sections leaves some important factors unexplored. The debate on semilingualism is presented in five or six pages, quite appropriately using Sweden as the country of illustration. Nevertheless, the psycholinguistic elements of the debate are only touched on, and the relevance of this debate to the theories of culture presented in the first chapter is not fully explained.

The section on French-English bilingualism in Canada is again interesting and worthwhile, though almost certainly familiar to most professional or academic readers of this book. Yet apart

from a paragraph or two, issues of pluralism in Canada are not explored by the authors. They do mention the Heritage Programme, begun in the late 1970s (p.38), but broader issues relating to Canada's indigenous and more recent migrant peoples (e.g. the Ukrainians) receive scant treatment. It may be thought that this criticism is quite unjustified, and that the authors are simply using Canada to illustrate one particular aspect of their discussion in chapter one. That discussion did centre on cultural pluralism, however. Also, given that much of the rest of the book centres on multiethnic Australia, the very least that can be said is that the authors missed an opportunity to develop further aspects of their theory by using Canada as a case study.

The third and final section of this chapter deals with language rights in the United States. While there is again some valuable material here, it is regrettable that the authors did not see fit to include their later discussion on rights (pp.132-3) as an introduction to this section. As it is, there is not enough here to challenge the reader on the whole issue of migrant and indigenous rights, nor is there a serious attempt to deal with potential or actual differences between the rights of those two groups.

The chapter is also somewhat unsatisfactory for a different reason. It fails to explain or comment on the precautions necessary when using different cultural settings to clarify aspects of what is clearly a culture-dependent issue, that of language use. As a comparativist working in the field of language, this reviewer felt concerned that such precautions were not an integral part of the discussion, when MLDC is avowedly moving to construct "a more general argument" (p.1) than one applying just to Australia.

In fact, the authors may have achieved their purpose better by an even more extensive focus on Australia, interweaving aspects of the Swedish, Canadian and American experience into this extended discussion. Yet this second chapter typifies the strength and the weakness of MLDC. It raises important issues; it offers a balanced view of these; and the issues do relate to aspects of their argument on culture and language. On the other hand, some of these issues cry out for more extensive treatment; there are issues of language and culture that receive scant mention; and the broader problem of the extent to which socio-cultural differences might affect the generalisability of conclusions about the issues presented is not addressed in any substantive way.

The third chapter deals with language issues in Australia, discussing moves from notions of "linguistic pluralism" to "social equity". This chapter is more closely tied to the theoretical issues raised in chapter one. It is perceptive and challenging study in its own right, incorporating some substantial discussion of different views which have been offered by (mainly) Australian-based writers in the field in recent years. Yet even here there is an uneasy balance between discussions of theory and analyses of policy. Given the overall aims of the book, it may have been more fruitful to have concentrated more on the policies and their implementation (or lack of it), and less on some of the academic debates, debates which in some aspects are perhaps less accessible to those working outside Australia in recent years. Once again, it is not that what is presented is uninteresting - far from it - but that the focus at times seems to shift from the central purposes of the book.

At this point, the book could end. Indeed, the final sentences of chapter three almost suggests that this was the intention. The authors note that they have contributed by highlighting some vexing issues and that they have "concentrated on educational issues around the language question". This, indeed, they have done. The next chapter, however, proceeds to examine issues in the evaluation of language proficiency by way of introduction to the case study research which is described in chapter five.

Chapter four deals with traditional and recent models of language testing, but also introduces basic notions about testing, such as forms of validity and reliability. There are some brief descriptions of the tests used in the authors' Wollongong research (see below), and the chapter concludes with a similarly brief introduction to the systemic linguistic theories of Halliday and some of the elaborations of this theory by his co-workers.

As with the international perspectives, there is perhaps too much here simply to set the scene for the research report which follows, yet too little to satisfy those interested in language testing in general and the assessment of communicative proficiency in particular. In yet another sense this latter point may again be considered unfair. Much has emerged in the assessment of language both in theory and - especially - at the level of practice since the authors conducted their research in the mid-eighties. In Australia itself, as well as in Britain, New Zealand and other countries, much has been done recently in the field of competency testing. An update of this chapter written in the early nineties would surely reflect this.

The final "content" chapter summarises a significant and interesting project conducted by the authors. The research looked at the language maintenance and proficiency of Germans and Macedonians in the Wollongong-Shellharbour region of New South Wales. The chapter presents some fascinating data on language use and proficiency, some particularly telling information and discussion based on interviews with key informants (people involved directly or indirectly with language in the two groups studied), and insightful comments about intergenerational differences. Yet some of the data is presented in almost indigestible form; try reading pages 164-78 and then writing a commentary on what you have read! At times even the detailed data are confusing. We are told on page 179 that the Germans who did have a working knowledge of their language were more proficient than the Macedonians, and that this applied particularly to high school children. On the next page we are informed that "High school students of Macedonian background appeared to have a higher level of mother tongue proficiency than those of German background." (p.180). The two statements can of course make sense, if we assume that on the second occasion the authors are talking about average levels of performance, but the authors could have communicated better in this section. The fairly small numbers of informants in the various subgroups are, incidentally, quite understandable given the nature of the research; the decision to present the data in tenths of percentage points is perhaps less easy to understand.

A more serious point arises when we are informed that discrepancies between parent and children's reports in one aspect of language use may reflect problems in "the whole methodology of opinion surveys" (p.169). Yet this comes in the middle of a lengthy section which gives a number of percentages based on answers to similar sorts of questions. The Wollongong-Shellharbour research is an interesting study in its own right, but it may have been possible to use selected data in a way which better illustrated the theoretical issues raised in the first chapter.

After all the points raised above, it may be somewhat surprising to find this review coming to a positive conclusion about MLDC. Yet a careful reading of the criticisms made will show that the major concern is with what might be termed "selection and form" rather than "content". The authors do raise a number of important issues in every section of the book. They achieve their aim of clarifying some of the complexities of theorising about plural societies, and of demonstrating some of the specific issues which need to be taken into account when considering these complexities. Thirdly, they offer a blend of the theoretical and the practical, the local (Australian) and the international.

All things considered, the appeal of the book may be greatest for two very different kinds of reader. First, those Australian readers with a general interest in language and culture in their society will find this book a useful although at times very condensed introduction to a range of significant issues. Secondly, specialists in the field may experience some of the same frustrations as the reviewer, but they will almost certainly find issues to take up, theoretical and practical observations of value, and fertile ground for future research. Perhaps this is mainly because the book is never neutral. It offers ideas, challenges and evidence from a wide range of disciplines, but not simply in terms of conventional knowledge in these fields. Despite this book's limitations, it is still well worth reading.