Discourses on Language and Integration

Edited by Gabrielle Hogan-Brun,
Clare Mar-Molinero and Patrick Stevenson

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and Integration

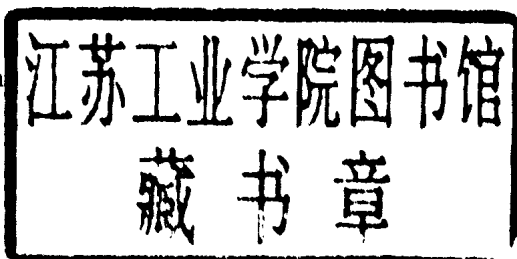Critical perspectives on language testing regimes
in Europe

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Discourses on Language and Integration

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CHAPTER 1

Testing regimes

Introducing cross-national perspectives on language, migration and citizenship

Gabrielle Hogan-Brun, Clare Mar-Molinero
and Patrick Stevenson

One of the most pressing issues in contemporary European societies is the need to promote integration and social inclusion in the context of rapidly increasing migration. A particular challenge confronting national governments is how to accommodate speakers of an ever-increasing number of languages within what in most cases are still perceived as monolingual indigenous populations. This has given rise to public debates in many countries on proposals to impose a requirement of competence in a 'national' language and culture as a condition for acquiring citizenship. These debates in turn have revealed an urgent need to develop a fuller conceptual and theoretical basis than is currently available for the widespread public discussion of the linguistic and cultural requirements being proposed as elements in the gate-keeping process leading to the achievement of citizenship in many EU member states. The controversial nature of such policy proposals and their potentially far-reaching consequences are often highlighted in public debates on social inclusion and integration. This however is frequently conducted almost entirely at a national level within each state, with little if any attention paid either to the broader European context or to comparable experience in other parts of the world. At the same time, further EU enlargement and the ongoing rise in the rate of migration into and across Europe suggest that the salience of these issues is likely to continue to grow. This volume focuses on these debates and seeks to problematise many existing definitions regarding language and citizenship and to challenge some of the assumptions underlying the new 'testing regimes'.

1. Introduction: Citizenship, language and the nation-state

National conceptions of citizenship are the outcome of accelerating, nationalising activities from the 17th-century onwards that sought to intensify the power of the

state over the population. The rise of the modern, interventionist state meant that a whole variety of previously diverse practices within a given, unified territory came under pressure to be made more coherent, unified and manageable, resulting in administrative and coercive procedures that were homogenised for greater efficiency (Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990; Schöpflin 1997). As one of the pivotal instruments in this process, language began to play a central role in identity marking and, as a corollary, boundary setting, and the consequences of this have been widely documented in commentaries on language, culture and nationalism (Barbour and Carmichael 2000; Wright 2000; May 2003). Over time challenges arose at the state level with the incorporation of new territories (such as South Tyrol by Italy or Northern Schleswig by Denmark following World War I), through state failure (as in former Yugoslavia) or cross-border movements of people (e.g. from Eastern to Western Europe, as in the wake of eastward EU enlargement), when people with different aspirations and ways of life began to merge with resident populations, thereby disrupting established bureaucratic patterns. Consequently, political and institutional frameworks linked to territorial boundaries were developed and adjusted according to perceived pressures and needs.

As a result of these developments, political debates have increasingly revolved around citizenship issues. In parallel, this complex concept has received much scholarly attention across a range of disciplines (e.g. Miller 2000; Delanty 2000; Hansen 1998). Stressing the malleability of this notion, Judith Squires (2002: 228f) sees it as straddling different axes of tension which she divides as follows: the rights/responsibility axis, the principal focus in mainstream Western political theory, which involves debates not only about the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, but also the appropriate form of each; the territorial/cosmopolitan axis, adopted in theoretical reflections upon nations and nationalism, which explores the centrality for the sovereign nation state of the territorial dimensions of the concept; and the universal/particular axis, focusing on the merits of and foundations for universal norms and evaluation. The rights/responsibilities approach sees membership of a community as a status based on possession of specific rights with associated responsibilities. In our era of extensive migration this notion has been increasingly coupled with that of territorial/cosmopolitan citizenship, thus reinforcing the boundary-staking functions of citizenship as a legal basis. In this context, the right to enter or remain in a country has become a critical issue for citizenship and intensified the gate-keeping role of the state in regulating access to territory. In contrast, and possibly fuelled by globalisation, the universalist paradigm seeks a more differentiated model of citizenship that ensures fundamental rights based on broader norms. Debates on citizenship issues tend to revolve around each of these three axes and frequently develop their own dynamics at the national level.

During the last decade, particularly since the 2004 round of the EU's eastward enlargement, a shift has been observed in many European countries towards stricter conditions for people who want to apply for residence rights or for naturalisation/citizenship. Proficiency in a, or the, 'national language' of the country has been a requirement in some states for many years, but in most cases until recently this has been subject to testing only on a relatively informal and often arbitrary basis (for example, by means of a short interview with an immigration official with no training either in linguistic analysis or in language testing). However, linguistic proficiency has now emerged as one of the key conditions for the granting of permission to stay and for naturalisation in an increasing number of European states, and where this is the case more formal mechanisms for testing have generally been introduced (often alongside testing of knowledge of the history, social institutions and cultural traditions of the country concerned). On the one hand, this could be seen as a necessary if belated formalisation of procedures that should introduce a greater degree of transparency and fairness into the process. On the other hand, it raises a host of ethical, political and practical questions: for example, is it appropriate to use linguistic proficiency in a particular language as a criterion for granting residence rights or citizenship? If so, what level of proficiency in which form(s) of which language(s) should be required, and how should this be tested? Should this requirement be imposed on all applicants or should certain categories be exempted, and if so, on what grounds? Such questions will be addressed by each of the contributors to this volume, and the fundamental issues underlying all of them will be reviewed in the concluding chapter.

Because of the diverse state-formation histories in Europe, the socio-political context in which these new conditions have been set up and language tests developed differ widely. The motivation, for example, in Latvia (for more information on the Baltic context in general, see Hogan-Brun et al. 2007) differs from that in the Netherlands (see Extra and Spotti, this volume) or Germany (see Stevenson 2006) or Spain (see Mar-Molinero and Smith 1996). Whilst new countries or recently re-established nation-states in central and eastern Europe are concerned with instituting, or, in the case of the latter, overturning formerly imposed language regimes, the challenge perceived by western European states relates to the increasing impact of multiculturalism resulting from extensive westward migration. At the same time, conditions in other countries such as Belgium (see Van Avermaet, this volume) and Sweden (see Milani 2007) have so far militated against the introduction of language tests as conditions for obtaining residence rights and citizenship.

With the increasingly multicultural nature of virtually every European state, an emerging challenge is whether codes of solidarity and reciprocal loyalty will be developed that allow for centrifugal and centripetal forces to co-exist harmoniously, particularly at the national level. This implies that appropriate political and

institutional systems for immigration and citizenship be set up to provide for the security and welfare of newcomers in their host countries. Currently these can only be developed at state level since there are no existing EU-wide frameworks for citizenship legislation that could bind states to a code of practice in determining regulations and procedures for granting residence rights and citizenship. The implications and practices resulting from language policies that impact on language and migration too vary in accordance with (often historically conditioned) ideologies on multiculturalism and (im)migration, and social-demographic developments in the countries concerned.

There is thus an urgent need to develop a fuller conceptual and theoretical basis than is currently available for the widespread public discussion of the linguistic and cultural requirements being proposed as an element in the gate-keeping process leading to the achievement of residence rights and especially of citizenship in many EU member states. As the chapters in this volume show, the controversial nature of policy proposals and their potentially far-reaching consequences for social inclusion and integration are often highlighted in public debates but these are frequently conducted at a national level within each state, with little if any attention paid either to the broader European context or to comparable experience in other parts of the world (notably in countries with long traditions of migration and highly developed language testing regimes such as the US, Israel or Australia). At the same time, further EU enlargement and the ongoing rise in the rate of migration into and across Europe suggest that the salience of these issues is likely to continue to grow. This volume, therefore, seeks to raise the level of discussion to take account of international dimensions and to promote a more coherent and more soundly based debate (see also Extra, Spotti and Van Avermaet, in press).

2.   Discourses on migration, language and citizenship

Prompted by the social impact of continuing cross-border flows of people since EU enlargement in 2004, the dynamics of contemporary political debates about migration, identity and citizenship have developed a powerful momentum across Europe. Perceived threats to national sovereignty (in economic, political and cultural terms), and in particular in relation to the idea of national integrity, have increasingly led governments to pursue policy agendas that have accentuated a 'politics of difference', based on what Blommaert and Verschueren (1998: 194–5) call the 'dogma of homogeneism': "a view of society in which differences are seen as dangerous and centrifugal and in which the 'best' society is suggested to be one without inter-group differences". In accordance with this view, national migration policies have been developed not merely as instruments of political 'management'