

GRIFFITHS, James. *Speak Not: Empire, Identity and the Politics of Language*. London: Zed Books, 2021. 251 pp. ISBN 978-1-78699-966-5

Reviewed by Antony Hoyte-West

Speak Not: Empire, Identity and the Politics of Language is by James Griffiths, an international journalist raised in Wales and currently based in Hong Kong. Taking a historical and sociopolitical approach to the issue, the volume zones in on the complex interplay between linguistic vulnerability, ethnocultural identity, and the aftermath of colonialism via the presentation of a series of case studies. In addition to an Introduction and an Epilogue, the book comprises three sections separated by two extended interludes. Though at the first glance the choice of minority languages for the book's main sections (Welsh, Hawaiian, and Cantonese) may seem unusual, Griffiths' analysis draws attention to interesting parallels between the three selected cases. These are significantly enriched not only by the wealth of historical details provided, but also by the author's illuminating discussions with speakers and activists of the languages concerned.



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Each of the main sections of the book opens with a map of the appropriate geographical area, as well as some basic information about the relevant language family, writing system, and a few sample phrases. The first section is dedicated to Welsh, and Griffiths starts his historical survey by noting the findings of school inspectors working in rural 1840s Wales, who erroneously scapegoated the Welsh language as the reason for Wales's poor socioeconomic conditions. Griffiths writes of widespread official desires to shift the population towards English, which hastened with the rise of mandatory school education in the last third of the nineteenth century; as the use of Welsh in the classroom became stigmatised, the language began to decline. The text then jumps forward to the global uncertainty of the 1930s, focusing on a time of growing Welsh national consciousness, as demonstrated by the destruction of a planned military base on the Llŷn Peninsula. This rise in political activism is then charted through the context of the postwar economic slump and de-industrialisation which affected Wales's coal industry, as well as the unsuccessful 1979 vote on devolution and the 1997 referendum which created the autonomous Welsh Assembly. Finally, by critically examining the legal and educational framework for Welsh in modern-day Wales, the author outlines the current status and role of the language in society, observing that Wales is often seen as a good template for how other minority languages can be revitalised.

The book's second section moves to the Pacific Ocean, focusing on the Austronesian language of Hawaiian. It begins with the death of the monarch Kamehameha V in 1872, who passed away at a time when the Kingdom of Hawai'i was under significant threats from multiple colonial powers. Griffiths details the fortunes of the Hawaiian language in the latter years of the 19th century and links it to the major sociopolitical changes that took place, stating that at first the early Christian missionaries seemed to be a positive force for the language. Ultimately, foreign intervention was firstly to lead to the end of the monarchy, the creation of a republic, and subsequently to Hawai'i's loss of independence when it became an American territory in 1898. As the language of the new rulers, English was enshrined in law at the expense of the islands' native tongue, and the vitality of Hawaiian faltered. Griffiths then springs forward to the present-day to survey current initiatives relating to the resurgence of the language in recent years. Based on conversations with local Hawaiian language teachers and language activists, he notes that through provision in schools as well as relevant institutional and administrative measures, Hawaiian is once again moving towards becoming part of everyday life on the islands.

The final section of the book focuses on Cantonese, beginning dramatically with the 1841 seizure of Hong Kong by the British during the First Opium War. In these chapters, Griffiths presents the historical underpinnings to the complex debates between Cantonese and the currently-dominant Mandarin. In passing, he details literacy-related issues via nineteenth and twentieth century debates on the complexity of the logographic writing system used for Chinese, including mooted Latinate alphabets. He also notes the challenges that Cantonese posed to Mandarin, owing to its status as the language of southern China (Canton) with strong commercial links to western colonial powers.

Moving forward to the modern era, the visibility Cantonese enjoyed during the last few years of British rule is contrasted with the shift to Mandarin after 1997. Griffiths observes that Mandarin has gained ground over Cantonese in many domains, and these observations then segue into discussions of Mandarin language policy vis-à-vis the politics of minority languages elsewhere in China.

As mentioned above, the three main sections are complemented by two brief interludes. Examined through the prism of racial and identity politics, the first centres on the complexities of Afrikaans language policy in South Africa, tracing its history as a rural language descended from Dutch to the language of power during the apartheid era, before its change in status to become one of the Rainbow Nation's eleven official languages. The second is an interesting reflection which weaves the creation of Esperanto in the late nineteenth century with an analysis of the revitalisation of Hebrew and the decline of Yiddish as vehicular languages, noting the different attitudes and debates as well as the decision to recognise Hebrew as the language of the new state of Israel in 1948. These two interludes complement the geographical and thematic aspects of the main sections, whetting the reader's curiosity to discover more about the relevant discussions (to that end, detailed notes, a bibliography, and an index are appended to the volume). Finally, the book's epilogue synthesises Griffiths' thoughts on the political and historical aspects of minority languages and what could occur in the future.

Speak Not: Empire, Identity and the Politics of Language is an engaging narrative where specific historical events are contextualised and extrapolated to provide incisive analyses on current topics which are increasingly pertinent to the global agenda. As demonstrated by UNESCO's designation of the period between 2022 and 2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, the protection of linguistic diversity – and by extension, of the world's many minority languages – is becoming more and more relevant given the rise of technology and the ever-growing hegemony of major international languages such as English and Mandarin Chinese. An important strength of Griffiths' book is his ability to underline parallels between historical events and current debates, thus facilitating the understanding and analysis of many of the complex sociopolitical debates surrounding the featured case studies. Additionally, by incorporating the voices of speakers and activists, the everyday importance of the selected languages is underscored, thereby bringing together scholarly reflections with the reality of day-to-day life. In short, this is a thought-provoking volume which invites the reader to reflect deeply on the current status and future direction not only of Welsh, Hawaiian, and Cantonese, but also of other minority languages in the broader global environment.

REFERENCE

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