PANEL TITLE
"The Politics of Language or the Language of Politics? Political Linguistics and Conflict."

Panel Abstract:

This panel has been designed to convey the importance and utility of explicitly incorporating a linguistic perspective to the study of international relations in general, and to conflict/conflict processes in particular. Given the importance of more completely specifying the theoretical context used in our analyses, the panel papers will demonstrate how language and linguistic analysis can and should be included to study conflict in the global arena. The papers on the panel will stress the complementarities and synergies between the work of political scientists and linguists, the development and use of language-based datasets, the importance of adding the concepts/theories/methods of linguists to the analytical toolbox available to political scientists, the forms of contemporary situations of language conflict, and methodologies used to demonstrate the importance of language in political interaction and social conflict (e.g. computational text analyses).

PANEL CHAIR
Harvey Starr, Political Science, University of South Carolina

PANEL DISCUSSANT
Zaryab Iqbal, Pennsylvania State University

PANEL PAPERS

Stanley Dubinsky, Linguistics, University of South Carolina

"21st century Ethnolinguistic Conflict: Resurgent, Re-created, and Created"

Language and ethnolinguistic identity play an increasingly important role in defining and exacerbating conflicts in a post-colonial and post-Cold War world. The resurgent salience of ethnolinguistically motivated conflict is somewhat unexpected, and even now not fully appreciated. In the past two decades, the number and intensity of such conflicts have increased several fold. Decolonization of the 1960s, the unraveling of the Soviet Union, the post-Vietnam War withdrawal of Western powers from Southeast Asia, and the weakening or dissolution of autocratic regimes in North Africa and the Middle East have all opened the way for the emergence, re-emergence, or creation of sometimes violent ethnolinguistic conflicts. This paper will illuminate the differences between hegemonic empire, with its linguistic chauvinism, multi-ethnic tolerance, and localized languages, and resurgent ethnic secessionism and linguistic nationalism. It will examine identity-driven ethno-linguistic struggles of the new nation states and nascent intra-state nations, showing them to be neither wholly primordial nor purely utilitarian. We will examine cases wherein (i) long-standing ethnolinguistic conflicts (e.g. Pashtuns in Afghanistan), (ii) resuscitated dormant conflicts (e.g. Serbia-Croatia-Bosnia), and (iii) newly created conflicting identities (e.g. Israel and Cameroon) are variously instrumentalized to advance political agendas.

Tag/Key words: Ethnolinguistic identity, Ethnolinguistic conflict, Empire, Post-colonial ethnic politics, Primordial/utilitarian models

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Leah Windsor, Political Science & Institute for Intelligent Systems, University of Memphis

"Perspectives on Language and Culture in Event Data"

In discourse analysis, corpus selection skews heavily toward English-language sources. This skew reflects a Western bias that in turn influences the scope, interpretation, and external validity of research on international politics (Windsor, 2018). As a result, information retrieval and extraction from potentially important non-English data sources cannot be efficiently or properly conducted, even when the corpora are available and properly stored. In this paper, I use the process of event data generation as an example of each of these problems. Event data assigns numerical values for sources, actions, and targets in international relations (Schrodt, 2012). Most of the events are derived from reports by Western news outlets which follow a highly formulaic grammatical formats; however, this approach has failed to foresee major geopolitical processes such as the Arab Spring (Wang, Kennedy, Lazer, & Ramakrishnan, 2016). I argue that because event data does not encode non-Western and local media sources, it fails to account for micro-processes that have macro implications. In this paper I also identify some workable solutions that may help scholars to learn more about different interpretations of global problems.

Key words: computational text analysis, bias, event data

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Jaime Jackson, Political Science, California State University - Sacramento

"The World Languages Dataset (WLD) 1945-2015: Logic, Characteristics, and International Implications"

This paper introduces the World Languages Dataset (WLD), part of the cultural characteristics of the international system project. A first of its kind dataset cataloging the distribution of languages across the globe over time, it builds on the work of linguists, using sources ranging from censuses to linguistic studies of specific countries, peoples, or languages. The dataset consists of three elements: First, a nation-half-decade dataset that provides information on the number of speakers of over 3,000 languages in each country since 1945 (at five-year intervals). Second, a language-based dataset examining changes in the number of speakers of any of these languages across the globe and over time. Third, a regional dataset describing the distribution of languages in specific regions. One goal is to establish cultural characteristics of societies, thereby complementing the world religion project (Maoz and Henderson 2013), permitting multiple opportunities to study the relationship between culture and international domestic political/social processes. The paper describes the underlying logic and procedures of data collection; provides some key descriptive statistics about world languages; and shows some basic correlates between languages and internal and international conflict and cooperation.

Tags/Key Words: Language, Culture, Linguistic affinity, International conflict, International cooperation.

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Kimi Lynn King and James Meernik, Political Science, University of North Texas

"Targeting Language: Exploring Language Endangerment During the Colombian Civil War"

Scholars of conflict and political violence, and linguists who study endangered languages are often researching the same populations, problems, and countries, but interdisciplinary studies about common foci are rare. We analyze one shared focus in the two fields—the relationship between political violence and language endangerment. First, we seek to understand the extent to which a conflict diminishes the viability of endangered languages through death, destruction, and displacement. Does violence hasten language loss, or does it force new strategies of survival and adaptation? Second, we examine whether communities are more likely to be targeted with violence when they speak an endangered language. We discuss the interrelationship between language endangerment and political violence in the context of the long-running civil war in Colombia. Colombia is a thought-provoking test case because the myriad of endangered languages spoken by the indigenous populations provide a data rich environment to explore theoretical intersections of the two disciplines and helps us better understand violence and language endangerment. We use duration models and geographically linked data on language, ethnicity, gender, economic development, political violence, and displacement across the 1100+ municipalities of Colombia to analyze these questions.

Tags/Key Words: Language endangerment, Political violence, Colombian civil war