**Multilingualism and Politics: Revisiting Multilingual Citizenship**
Edited by Katerina Strani (2020)

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**Synopsis**

In *Multilingualism and Politics: Revisiting Multilingual Citizenship*, Katerina Strani brings together 13 case studies to explore ‘the area of interplay between multilingualism and politics in the context of contemporary socio-political developments.’ She argues that while multilingualism has always existed in both society and politics, the interaction between the two in contemporary societies where it includes ‘new modalities and communications spaces’ is a ‘relatively underexplored area.’

The book’s interdisciplinary focus is on multilingualism – where multilingualism is both a concept and a phenomenon – as a key element in the social construction of contemporary public sphere. Strani and others argue that this is a multilingual sphere where power differentials are rooted in language. To make this case, the book looks first at ‘Multilingualism in Politics’ where the topic of multilingual publics is predominantly examined through the lens of translation studies. The second half of the book, ‘The Politics of Multilingualism,’ examines national and minority languages as political tools.

**Critical engagement**

While the book purports to ‘go beyond the usual empirical explorations on EU politics,’ I found it did so only in the second half of the volume. The
first half focuses exclusively on either multilingualism in the context of the European Union or, even more narrowly, in Great Britain. Despite these limitations, there are still some valuable takeaways from this section.

In her chapter, Strani provides a good overview of the various approaches to multilingualism as both a concept and a phenomenon through the lens of multiple scholars whose work I relied on to examine the multilingual practices of participants in interreligious dialogues. She begins by examining the various terms that have evolved to describe the ‘manifestations’ of multilingual practices for individuals, communities and politics and then goes on to define how these practices have created multilingual publics in the Habermasian sense – these publics are ‘less defuse and more thematised’ than communities.

I find that she does a good job of defining various notions of publics, particularly in the context of the book, but is less concrete regarding her definition of political and politics. She argues, for example, that ‘multilingualism is always inherently political in terms of motivations and practice.’ Given my own understanding of the scholars she relies on, I would disagree. Many of them (Blommaert, Pennycook, García, Jorgensen) specifically argue that the practice of multilingualism is speakers taking whatever linguistic resources they have at their disposal simply to create meaning rather than make any political statement.

Her argument that translation, particularly within the setting of the EU, is inherently political is much more convincing as is her assertion that ‘the choice of language in deliberation is always a political choice.’ However, it seems she, along with other scholars in the book, at times falls prey to the same framework they criticise – seeing languages as named and bounded entities, rather than resources that speakers access based on the situation, their fellow interlocutors and whatever ‘languages’ they can employ. That said, this is a necessary approach to multilingualism when one is working in an institutional setting such as the EU where the standard varieties of official languages are expected.

Ultimately, Strani makes three valid arguments: there is a need to not only reconsider the definition of multilingualism but to also decolonise multilingualism within a (mostly) European setting while also understanding and addressing the politicisation of translation. Her fellow authors go on to address these arguments in varying degrees from their own multidisciplinary perspectives.

Martijn Mos, a scholar of international relations, differs from Strani in that he clearly tends to take a more ‘named and bounded’ path in studying various approaches to linguistic diversity by different institutions within the EU. Norm contestations between the European Parliament, the
Commission and the Council of what counts as linguistic diversity results in a ‘reductive understanding of linguistic diversity’ that puts the emphasis on language learning rather than the rights of linguistic minorities. In other words, linguistic diversity within the EU is ‘reduced’ to multilingualism. It is an approach that sees the ability to speak multiple languages as an economic asset.

He concludes that the opposing sides use the ‘semantic ambiguity’ of linguistic diversity within EU – multilingualism is both the individual ability to use multiple languages and the co-existence of different languages in one community – to their advantage in ways that allow the bodies to ‘steer clear of sensitive discussions on the rights of linguistic minorities.’

I found the focus of the second half of the book – the politics of multilingualism – to be more expansive in the study of multilingualism. Scholars consider the politics of standardisation in Galicia/Portugal, China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Hong Kong and minority language politics in Croatia.

Argyro Kanaki’s examination of multilingualism in the monolingual habitus of Scotland is, in my opinion, one of the strongest contributions to this volume. She, like Mos, notes the commodification of language learning in a neoliberal Scottish policy that considers learning languages to be ‘a value-added object.’ Scotland has two recognised minority languages – Scottish Gaelic and Scot – as well as a ‘1+2’ language policy that aims at developing pupils’ language skills, including teaching EU nationals the ‘mother tongue’ of their country of origin. What she finds is that ‘despite its multilingual disguise, government policy ‘encourages the ideology of the dominant language’ while ‘antithetically celebrating language diversity in the community.’ Ultimately, she concludes that Scottish policy (and politics) approaches multilingualism through a monoglot lens.

Sally Stainer’s compelling approach to an openly monolingual, French-only language policy in historically and culturally multilingual Guadeloupe was to employ the lens of ‘glottopolitics’ to account for the continual dialogue between state intervention and day-to-day Creole language practices. Developed by French sociolinguists, glottopolitics is not only a way to shape language use ‘beyond sheer policy,’ but also ‘allows for better consideration of the grassroots politics of language inherent in teaching.’

Stainer’s interviews showed that teachers found exclusive use of French as a medium of instruction to be counterproductive and regressive. It was the teachers who were instrumental in bringing the state to recognise Creole as a regional language and culture and the teachers who ‘truly have the upper hand in the French glottopolitical arena.’ It is these ‘glottopolitical engineers’ who can spur ‘grassroots language policy-making logic’ in place of top-down policies.
Recommendation of suitability

The value of this volume, in my opinion, is the individual case studies. I struggled at times to see an overarching cohesion to the book, but I found the individual works to be valuable in investigating and reflecting on the many ways multilingualism can be manifested in globalised political arenas. It will definitely be of interest to scholars and advanced students seeking a multidisciplinary understanding of the political nature of governmental and institutional multilingual policies, particularly as they relate to unequal treatment of minority languages.