The Attitudinal Interplay of Language, Ethnicity, And Separatism in Europe: An Empirical and Theoretical Review

Maciej Nowakowski

The Pontifical University of Pope John Paul II, Poland

Abstract

Researchers often utilize language as a proxy for ethnic identity in studies of conflict and separatism. However, equating language with ethnicity can be misleading, as language can transcend ethnic boundaries and is strongly linked to identity and social mobility. As a result, language may shape political preferences independently of ethnicity. This theoretical argument is demonstrated through a review of language attitude studies among minority language communities associated with regional separatism in France, Moldova, Poland, and Spain. A range of factors were assessed across all four communities: the demographic structure and categorisation of the context by claimed ethnic identity; the quanitity and diversity of languages spoken by group; the prominence and significance of political seperatism based on ethnicity and/or language proficiency levels; and the relative density and influence of ethnicity and/or language proficiency on separatist attitudes. Overall, the results demonstrate that individuals fluent in a peripheral lingua franca are more likely to support separatism than those who are not, while individuals more fluent in the language of the central state are less likely to support separatist outcomes. Furthermore, linguistic fluency appears to correlate more strongly with support for separatism than ethnic identity. These findings suggest that scholars should further disentangle language and ethnic identity in their analyses, as language may be more influential than ethnicity in shaping political preferences, and the most influential languages may not even correspond to ethnic groups.

Keywords: separatism, language politics, regional languages, regional studies, sociolinguistics