Language and ethnicity, and the broader topic of language and identity of which it forms an important part, have seen a fairly dramatic jump in prominence in publications and in linguistic and sociological curricula over the last decade or so. Such prominence is not surprising; what is surprising is that it took so long in coming. After all, ties between language and ethnicity have been documented since antiquity, coming into focus in narratives like the “shibboleth” story in Judges 12, where the perceived connection between tribe and accent cost 42,000 Ephraimites their lives (see the dedication to Jephthah in Bell 1976). Much earlier, of course, the “ethnologue” in Genesis 10 organizes humankind by intersecting categories of descent, language, territory, and “nation.”

Ethnicity itself continues to generate its own vast literature, in part because it is so difficult to tease apart from other features that people use to identify themselves and others, like race, ancestry, territory, history, religion, and language, and behavioral matters like cuisine and dress. (See Malešević 2004 for a survey of various sociological theories’ approaches to ethnicity, and Hutchinson and Smith 1996 for earlier significant literature.) Unfortunately, the conflicts with which ethnicity is frequently associated in the media and in reality constitute another reason why we must, and do, give ethnicity a lot of attention. But the place of language in the complex of ethnicity is not always a clear focus of this literature.

This gap in ethnicity studies and publications is now being well filled, whether in relation to language and identity in general (an early example is Edwards 1985) or with specific reference to ethnicity, as with Fishman’s (2001) and Harris’s (2003) readers. In such a context, then, what does yet another book, such as the one under review, have to offer?

Cambridge’s Key Topics in Sociolinguistics series aims to introduce current issues in specific areas of the sociology of language to students and others in an “accessible yet challenging” way, “to be used on courses and in seminars” (ii). Language and ethnicity (LE) in particular aims to provide such an overview of “the relationship between human language and ethnicity” (xi). Evaluating it as an introductory textbook in language and ethnicity, then, I find it a clear, well-
organized, interesting presentation “of the main concepts, issues, and debates, as well as a guide
to the key research findings in the field” (xi).

The first chapter, “What is ethnicity?” (3–18), addresses that very appropriate starting question
about a complex matter involving race, religion, language, customs, and much more. Fought
covers the basic ground well, within the dictates of space and introductory level. Important
specific notions include ethnicity as “a socially constructed category, not based on any
objectively measurable criteria” (4), ethnicity as “something that is highlighted most clearly
where ingroup/outgroup boundaries are part of the context” (13—cf. defining linguistic units
partly in terms of contrast), and ethnicity as potentially multiple, with some individuals having
more than a single ethnic identity (16). These ideas are generally accepted without controversy
today, but serious language-based development workers may still profit from being reminded to
keep all three of them in mind as they work with a specific community.

From this foundation, chapter 2, “Language and the construction of ethnic identity” (19–41) goes
into more detail, and with three brief case studies on the linguistic resources available to
individuals in constructing their (ethnic) identity/ies and available to communities in assigning
such to individuals. In the discussion of conditions that encourage or discourage a minority
group members’ assimilating their speech to that of the majority group around them, pride and
shame play a significant role, reminiscent of the crucial nature of these values in recent
sociological analyses of ancient Mediterranean cultures (see Malina 1993 for a standard starting
point).

With these “general issues in ethnicity and language” (the title of Part I) established, Fought
presents “Linguistic features and ethnicity in specific groups” as Part II, beginning with ch. 3 on
“African-American groups” (45-69) and ch. 4 on “Latino groups” (70-88), then giving shorter
treatments in ch. 5 (89-111) of Louisiana Creoles and Cajuns, various ethnic groups in South
Africa, and Maoris in New Zealand. Specifics of each case range from narrowly linguistic
matters like grammatical and phonological features of, for example, African American
Vernacular English, to attitudes toward vernaculars and toward languages of those in power, to
code-switching—all, of course, with reference to how people use language resources to identify
themselves, and others, as part of one group and not part of another.

Many readers of the book and, perhaps, of this review, will be “white” Americans or Europeans
who keep asking if any of this applies to them (us). Ch. 6, “Are white people ethnic? Whiteness,
dominance, and ethnicity” (112-132) acknowledges that some will find the title question
“absurd,” with lack of ethnicity as impossible as lack of accent in one’s speech. Yet daily
usage—at least in American shops that have specially labeled aisles for “ethnic” items in contrast
to the vast majority of their merchandise—makes clear that “ethnic” for most people is not such
a neutral term, applicable to everyone. At any rate, F presents clear linguistic marks, and social
consequences, of “sounding white” and, most interestingly, a description of how members of
(oth)er ethnic groups portray “whites” with great humorous effect through stereotyped ways of
speech that serve to mark white “ethnicity” in a given society. Part II closes with ch. 7, “Dialect
contact, ethnicity, and language change” (133-151), dealing with mutual diachronic effects of
minority and majority dialects, or two or more minority dialects.
Readers who have been baffled by, and eventually come to an understanding of and adjustment to, the way different peoples define appropriate language behavior (often studied as part of the “ethnography of speaking”) will resonate with much of what is presented in Part III, “The role of language use in ethnicity.” Ch. 8, “Discourse features, pragmatics, and ethnicity” (155-171) uses intergroup differences like how long to wait before replying to your interlocutor, indirectness (“Close the window” vs. “It’s rather cold in this room, don’t you think?”), joking, and the importance attached to deflecting a compliment rather than accepting it to drive home the pervasiveness of such behavioral differences even among speakers of “the same” language—differences correlated with culture, and hence with ethnicity. Some of the negative consequences of our perception of such differences (which bring to mind the longstanding Australian stereotype of Americans as boring, and the American stereotype of Australians as argumentative) are then developed in ch. 9, “Interethnic communication and language prejudice” (172–196). Special attention is given to how these differences work out in educational settings and how they should be dealt with there.

Part III closes with ch. 10; “Crossing: may I borrow your ethnicity?” (197–215). Crossing is “the use of a code associated with a group to which the speaker does not belong” (219), like Americans trying to sound like Aussies, or majority members talking like members of some minority (ethnic) group. Why do people cross, and what are the consequences? As with so much else in this book, language-based development workers will do well to notice who in a community crosses, with what purposes, and with what results. In particular, such observations may give them a clearer understanding of how their own attempts to “go native” and use the local vernacular may be perceived by members of the community.

A virtue of the book is its interplay between theoretical issues and concrete examples from a variety of language/ethnicity-contact situations in several parts of the world. In addition, each chapter closes with three or four thoughtful discussion questions and four to six briefly annotated suggestions for further reading, features which, along with a ten-page glossary, add significantly to the pedagogical quality of the book. For those wanting an introduction to language and ethnicity, this is a very good resource. And for those already somewhat acquainted with the field, this is also a good refresher, with lots of specific information and thought-provoking questions thrown in to enhance that acquaintance.

References


